

# The Kohler Strike of 1954: Lessons on Conflict and Compromise

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Research Paper

2,371 Words

“Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates to invention. It shocks us out of sheeplike passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving.”<sup>1</sup>

John Dewey

The Kohler Strike of 1954 was the longest strike in American History.<sup>2</sup> Over a decade of conflict occurred before a final settlement was reached.<sup>3</sup> It happened at a time when organized labor was at its strongest.<sup>4</sup> The long drawn out course of the strike was a result of Kohler Company president Herbert Kohler’s unwillingness to compromise.<sup>5</sup> This occurred in an era in which collective bargaining and the right of workers to arbitrate were previously effective mechanisms for compromise and improvement for the working class.<sup>6</sup> The striking laborers persevered and ultimately succeeded in receiving concessions. However it was a turning point in American labor history in which smaller often family owned companies would aggressively try to undermine unions and debase organized labor.<sup>7</sup> It gave rise to new challenges for laborers which continue to plague workers in America today. The lessons learned from this sentinel strike in history can inform the people of today and guide them to protect American laborers so that conflict is not stifled, but instead can lead to conversation, negotiation and compromise.

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<sup>1</sup> Dewey, John. *Human Nature and Conduct: an Introduction to Social Psychology*. Emereo Publishing, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Bybee, Roger. Phone interview. January 8th 2018

<sup>3</sup> Uphoff, Walter. *Kohler on Strike 30 Years of Conflict*, 413-421. Saunders of Toronto, Canada, 1966.

<sup>4</sup> Lichtenstein, Nelson. Phone interview. January 8th 2018

<sup>5</sup> Perlstein, Rick. *Before the Storm*, 35. Nation Books, 116 East 16th Street, 8th Floor, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Library of Congress Teachers. *Great Depression And World War II, 1929-1945*. Accessed January 14th 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Lichtenstein, Nelson. Phone interview. January 8th 2018

Organized labor in America has long fought for fundamental rights for workers. The early labor unions were formed in response to poor and inhumane wages, hours and working conditions endured by laborers during the rapid industrial growth in the United States in the late 1800s.<sup>8</sup> Workers often met resistance and had little protection when fighting for their basic rights through strikes. However, in the 1930s great strides were made in improving the rights of workers as a result of Franklin Roosevelt's pro-union position and his New Deal legislation.<sup>9</sup>

The New Deal empowered laborers to advocate for themselves. In 1935 the National Labor Relations Act was passed. It gave workers the right to choose their own unions. It banned intimidating, firing and blacklisting of union participants as well as the use of company spies. It gave workers the right to collectively bargain and mandated that companies arbitrate with unions. It also allowed laborers to strike, boycott and picket their employers.<sup>10</sup> Strikes over conflicts between workers and companies with subsequent bargaining and compromise were effective in bettering the lives of union workers and all workers in the coming years.<sup>11</sup>

A few years later in 1939 World War II started.<sup>12</sup> After World War II ended in 1945 there was an economic boom in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Postwar wealth arose as a result of New Deal politics and America's new role as a leading world power. Family income increased resulting in

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<sup>8</sup> Ozanne, Robert. *The Labor Movement in Wisconsin*, The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, pg. 4-7

<sup>9</sup> Library of Congress Teachers. *Great Depression And World War II, 1929-1945*. Accessed January 14th 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Lichtenstein, Nelson. *Who Built America*, 431-432. Catherine Woods.

<sup>11</sup> Library of Congress Teachers. *Great Depression And World War II, 1929-1945*. Accessed January 14th 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Lichtenstein, Nelson. *Who Built America*, 535-537. Catherine Woods.

<sup>13</sup> Lichtenstein, Nelson. *Who Built America*, 570. Catherine Woods.

economic security and a population boom. Two new dominant forces influenced the economy in this era, the strong labor movement and the large peacetime military efforts due to the Cold War.

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After World War II, unions recruited more members than any other era in the history of the country. This resulted in almost 35 percent of America's labor force being enrolled in unions in 1953. The unions were a powerful economic influence. Wage increases negotiated by major unions set the standard for both union and nonunion workers. Arms production due to the Cold War promoted growth in manufacturing. Union and military endeavors helped maintain high wages, employment rates and consumption.<sup>15</sup> However, union strength and progress were being challenged by different forces.

During the Cold War the world was dividing into two opposing camps, the United States and its allies, and the Soviet Union and the countries it occupied and controlled. The "McCarthyism" movement occurred in the United States during this time period. This unsubstantiated "witch hunt" for communists and their supposed threat to the "internal security" of the nation created a repressed atmosphere for unions. Many businesses suggested communist subversion as an explanation for labor conflict and accused them of "infiltrating" labor organizations. This resulted in division within the labor movement.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Lichtenstein, Nelson. *Who Built America*, 572-573. Catherine Woods.

<sup>15</sup> Lichtenstein, Nelson. *Who Built America*, 573-575. Catherine Woods.

<sup>16</sup> Lichtenstein, Nelson. *Who Built America*, 562-568. Catherine Woods.

In the post World War II era there was also a political shift against unions and towards more conservative politics. Successful wartime production led to greater trust in capitalism and company leadership. Company leaders made compromises during wartime but became resistant to this after the war.<sup>17</sup> The Taft-Hartley Act was passed in 1947. It limited the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 by making strikes and boycotts more difficult to carry out.<sup>18</sup> This political shift reflected union opposition by the public and government in the United States. The Kohler Company epitomized this anti-union sentiment.<sup>19</sup>

The Kohler company was founded in the small town of Sheboygan, Wisconsin in 1873 by John F. Kohler. The company produced bathroom and kitchen fixtures.<sup>20</sup> It was started as a company town which housed laborers and provided corporate welfare programs for them such as group life insurance and a pension plan.<sup>21</sup> The Great Depression, lasting from 1929-1935<sup>22</sup>, resulted in deterioration of labor relations at Kohler.<sup>23</sup> This was followed by a long history of conflict rooted in Kohler Company's hostility towards unions. The Company's refusal to compromise was penetrated only by force. They allowed participation in a local union affiliated with the AFL-CIO in order to gain contracts during World War II. Kohler later established a company union, the Kohler Workers Association. However, these unions existed primarily in

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<sup>17</sup> Lichtenstein, Nelson. *Who Built America*, 555-556. Catherine Woods.

<sup>18</sup> Lichtenstein, Nelson. *Who Built America*, 556-557. Catherine Woods.

<sup>19</sup> Lichtenstein, Nelson. *Who Built America*, 557-558. Catherine Woods.

<sup>20</sup> Bybee, Roger. *The Longest Strike*, Z magazine. Accessed on December 5th 2017

<sup>21</sup> Green, Hardy. *The Company Town*, 193-194. Basic Books, 387 Park Avenue South, New York.

<sup>22</sup> Lichtenstein, Nelson. *Who Built America*, 376. Catherine Woods.

<sup>23</sup> Green, Hardy. *The Company Town*, 194. Basic Books, 387 Park Avenue South, New York.

name only.<sup>24</sup> They were essentially powerless. Therefore in 1952 Kohler workers voted to join the United Auto Workers Local 833(Local 833) in order have a voice.<sup>25</sup>

Joining with the Local 833 allowed Kohler workers greater resources and strength to advocate for themselves.<sup>26</sup> In 1954 the union requested a standard arbitration-grievance procedure, full seniority protection, a pay increase to bring Kohler rates more in line with others in the industry, pensions, a twenty minute lunch period for the enamel shop workers consistent with that of the other laborers, and other provisions.<sup>27</sup> Company leader Herbert Kohler refused to negotiate. A compromise could not be made. Therefore on April 5, 1954 Kohler employees went on strike.<sup>28</sup>

The Kohler Strike of 1954 began with over 2,000 employees assembled in a close walking formation called "belly to back". This was used to prevent any non-strikers from penetrating the line. They halted plant operations for fifty-four days. The company argued that mass striking was illegal and referred to the striking laborers as "criminals and goons".<sup>29</sup> The Wisconsin Labor Relations Board declared the union guilty of mass picketing and ordered the union to cease and desist from what they referred to as "coercive" activities<sup>30</sup>. The workers were forced to rely on other strategies to address the conflict and strive for compromise.

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<sup>24</sup> Bybee, Roger. *The Longest Strike*, Z magazine. Accessed on December 5th 2017

<sup>25</sup> Uphoff, Walter. *Kohler on Strike 30 Years of Conflict*, 116-117. Saunders of Toronto, Canada, 1966.

<sup>26</sup> Bybee, Roger. *The Longest Strike*, Z magazine. Accessed on December 5th 2017

<sup>27</sup> Uphoff, Walter. *Kohler on Strike 30 Years of Conflict*, 142-143. Saunders of Toronto, Canada, 1966.

<sup>28</sup> Uphoff, Walter. *Kohler on Strike 30 Years of Conflict*, 145. Saunders of Toronto, Canada, 1966.

<sup>29</sup> Uphoff, Walter. *Kohler on Strike 30 Years of Conflict*, 145-147. Saunders of Toronto, Canada, 1966.

<sup>30</sup> Uphoff, Walter. *Kohler on Strike 30 Years of Conflict*, 150-160. Saunders of Toronto, Canada, 1966.

The union members implemented a more long term approach. They continued to picket but not mass picket. They built community support through news articles and meetings with the press. The union maintained daily communication with their members to keep them informed. They worked with other veteran strikers such as auto workers from Detroit who could mentor them. They launched nationwide outreach to other laborers including the Plumbers Union and other building-trade unions throughout the country. Many of these groups informally boycotted the purchase of Kohler products across the nation while avoiding violation of the Taft-Hartley Act. However the conflict continued.<sup>31</sup>

Herbert Kohler responded to their initiatives by continuing to refuse to compromise.<sup>32</sup> He hired non-union laborers. He also continued to use the non-strikers or “scabs”, which totaled about 500 of the 3,300 employees. Violence intermittently occurred over the course of the strike between the strikers and non-strikers. Kohler Company charged opponents with over 1,000 counts of vandalism and hundreds of arrests.<sup>33</sup> Kohler used the “McCarthyism” tactics of the times to villainize the unions.<sup>34</sup> His portrayal of unions as violent was different from the previous sentiment cultivated in the 1930s when laborers were viewed as victims of employer attacks on picket lines.<sup>35</sup> He propagated this idea in Wisconsin and beyond.

Herbert Kohler traveled throughout the country during the years of the strike speaking to different business groups. He relentlessly criticized unions and promoted the notion that they

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<sup>31</sup> Bybee, Roger. *The Longest Strike*, Z magazine. Accessed on December 5th 2017

<sup>32</sup> Lichtenstein, Nelson. Phone interview. January 8th 2018

<sup>33</sup> Bybee, Roger. *The Longest Strike*, Z magazine. Accessed on December 5th 2017

<sup>34</sup> Bybee, Roger. *The Longest Strike*, Z magazine. Accessed on December 5th 2017

<sup>35</sup> Lichtenstein, Nelson. *State of The Union*, xx. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street.

were violent. He also instilled the idea that unions were trying to take over management's control of working hours, shop rules, merit pay and the subcontracting of work.<sup>36</sup> In addition, he championed his anti-union movement through connections in the political arena.

Herbert Kohler's family had long held political power in Wisconsin. However Kohler also aligned himself with a national network of powerful anti-union politicians such as Senator Barry Goldwater.<sup>37</sup> Senator Goldwater was a political leader who opposed the New Deal.<sup>38</sup> Herbert Kohler pursued all possible avenues to destroy organized labor.

The union was ultimately successful in securing some of the strike requests of the Kohler workers. After years of conflict involving strikes, boycotts and court proceedings, Kohler was forced to compromise. On December 17, 1966 the final settlement was approved by the U.S. Court of Appeals.<sup>39</sup> Laborers' jobs were reinstated and pay increases and back-pay for lost wages were retroactively provided.<sup>40</sup> However the company resisted the demand for a union shop and claimed they won the strike because they provided their workers with the "right to join or not join a union".<sup>41</sup> The landscape for collective bargaining was changing.

Herbert Kohler's unyielding refusal to arbitrate and compromise was a brazen response to the union's requests. The workers' experience with this conflict provided a lens into the future.

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<sup>36</sup> Green, Hardy. *The Company Town*, 194. Basic Books, 387 Park Avenue South, New York.

<sup>37</sup> Bybee, Roger. *The Longest Strike*, Z magazine. Accessed on December 5th 2017

<sup>38</sup> Perlstein, Rick. *Before the Storm*, 35. Nation Books, 116 East 16th Street, 8th Floor, 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Uphoff, Walter. *Kohler on Strike 30 Years of Conflict*, 413. Saunders of Toronto, Canada, 1966.

<sup>40</sup> Uphoff, Walter. *Kohler on Strike 30 Years of Conflict*, 405-410. Saunders of Toronto, Canada, 1966.

<sup>41</sup> The New York Times. *The Kohlers of Wisconsin*. Accessed January 24th 2018.



Many company leaders considered Herbert Kohler to be a hero and emulated him.<sup>42</sup> For example in the Cone Mills Strike of 1959 a labor conflict broke out and resulted in a strike which stopped the production of cotton at the Cone Mills. The company would not compromise and a decision was made to close the mill. This was one of many subsequent labor conflicts in which a company refused to negotiate.<sup>43</sup> This resistance to compromise was evident in political goals of these companies as well.

Joining with Herbert Kohler, leaders of other smaller-producing companies of the times which were often family owned contributed organizational support for the National Right-to-Work Committee. Some of these companies included Thompson Products, Lone Star Steel and Allen-Bradley. They also made large financial contributions to this effort. They were a pivotal force in putting the “right-to-work” referenda on the ballot in industrial states in 1958 and thus weakening organized labor.<sup>44</sup>

The impact of the Kohler Strike of 1954 is far reaching. At the height of the union’s membership and power in the United States, Herbert Kohler defied the law and precedents pertaining to organized labor. In the face of conflict he refused to compromise and crusaded nationwide to debilitate unions. In doing so he undermined the platform on which workers could have a voice and arbitrate. This marked the beginning of the decline of union power that was followed by decades of weakening for unions. The percentage of the workforce who were union

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<sup>42</sup> Lichtenstein, Nelson. Phone interview. January 8th 2018

<sup>43</sup> Goodson, Mike. *Gone but not Forgotten*. Accessed January 22 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Lichtenstein, Nelson. *State of The Union*, 138. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street.

members decreased from its peak of about 35 percent at the time of the strike<sup>45</sup> to 10.7 percent in 2017.<sup>46</sup> The number of strikes in the United States decreased from 3,468 in 1954 to 15 in 2016.<sup>47</sup> Pro-labor New Deal legislation became fragmented throughout the country, even in states like Wisconsin in which unions have historically been strong and championed change nationwide. Amidst these declines there are valuable lessons to be learned.

The legacy of the union laborers in the Kohler Strike of 1954 extends well beyond the concessions they achieved in their workplace. Their tireless persistence throughout the conflict matched that of Herbert Kohler's. Their strength in numbers and solidarity sustained them so that they could persevere. Their outreach to the broader community helped them gain community support. Their recruitment of nationwide assistance via the informal boycott of Kohler products helped fortify them. These strategies enabled them to persevere and inform and inspire others both past and present.

One example of effective implementation of similar initiatives was The Delano Grape Strike of 1965 in California. Filipino and Latino agricultural workers joined forces by striking together. They also travelled across America sharing their stories and organizing an informal boycott. They generated mass support and families stopped buying grapes. This resulted in the first union contracts for table grape growers.<sup>48</sup> These strategies of solidarity, engagement of the

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<sup>45</sup> Bybee, Roger. Phone interview. January 8th 2018

<sup>46</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, (Economic News Release) last modified January 2018. Accessed February 2nd 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, (Work Stoppages) last modified January 2018. Accessed February 2nd 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Kim, Inga. *The 1965-1970 Delano Grape Strike and Boycott*. Accessed January 22 2018.

broader community and organization of informal boycotts are insightful for laborers when considering further self advocacy in the future.

The fight for fair and humane treatment of all workers in America is not over. Many laborers in the United States lack sufficient wages required to meet basic needs such as food, shelter and clothing. According to a recent report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are about 9.5 million “working poor” in America who are living below the poverty level.<sup>49</sup> They are working and yet not making enough money to secure the most rudimentary things needed for survival. This contradicts fundamental American principles.

The United States is built on the ideals of democracy and the belief that the American Dream is attainable for people of all races, religions and genders. Organized labor has long been a vehicle for improvement in the lives of the nation’s workers so that with hard work, motivation and commitment, economic security is achievable. It has enabled laborers to address conflicts with discourse followed by mutual compromise. The key to compromise however is that those parties involved in the conflict must have a voice in order to engage in conversation and work together to facilitate change. If there is no opportunity for dialogue then compromise cannot occur and the party in power dictates or rules, as it does in a dictatorship, not a democracy. In the Kohler Strike of 1954 conflict ultimately resulted in forced compromise through the judicial system. Americans must continue to learn from the many lessons conveyed through this strike and move forward remembering that it is their responsibility to protect democracy. Through hard

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<sup>49</sup> Bureau of Labor. (Economic News Release). Accessed January 24 2018.

work, determination and initiative all people in the United States should have not just a theoretical opportunity but a true and real opportunity to achieve the American Dream. To accomplish this Americans must have the political willpower to ensure that all laboring people have a voice so that conflict can lead to conversation, negotiation and compromise.

“No America without democracy, no democracy without politics no politics without parties, no parties without compromise and moderation”

-Clinton Rossiter

## Appendix 1



This picture shows the Kohler workers in a picket line outside Kohler Company during the strike.

## Appendix 2

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*Kohler*

**"All my life my Daddy's  
been on Strike  
to make my  
future better"**



*the*  
**KOHLER WORKER'S**  
*Story* →

This shows the cover of a pamphlet distributed by the strikers to inform the community.

### Appendix 3



This picture shows a group of strike supporters advocating for the boycott.



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