

BLOOD IN THE WATER: A History of IAMAW District Lodge 751

By John McCann

Reviewed by Rick Barnes

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Most workers today have little knowledge of labor in American history. The relative prosperity we enjoy did not result from the kindness of our employers. *BLOOD IN THE WATER* tells the history of the workers at Boeing who belong to IAM District 751. Starting in 1935, they struggled to win dignity and fairness.

The book begins in the 1930's when Boeing was a small, depression-era manufacturer. Conditions were bad for the workers. Boeing had no regular pay days. Wage rates and hiring rates were erratic. As late as 1935 men lined up outside the plant and foremen selected those needed for the day's work. Even so-called steady employees hired on by the day. Overtime was compulsory at regular hourly rates.

The American Federation of Labor was controlled by craft unions who had no interest in organizing mass-production workers. But the AFL gave aircraft production to the Machinists Union. By 1936 the IAM had negotiated its first agreement with Boeing. Though humble by our standards it was the first time that workers had guaranteed wage rates, overtime rates, lead pay, and job classifications. They even got paid lunches and breaks for the grave shift!

World War II brought about rapid change. The Local's membership swelled from 7300 in January of 1941 to 40,000 in 1945. For the duration of the war, organized labor pledged not to strike. Wages were frozen, hours increased and the cost of living skyrocketed. By 1943 Boeing workers' starting scale was 62.5 cents per hour, far less than the shipyards which started at \$1.00. Turnover was 130% per year.

While 751 could not strike, it could call a general membership meeting. On February 25, 1943 18,000 IAM members converged in downtown Seattle for a meeting to call attention to their plight. The union told the Government they would hold a 24 hour meeting; then Lockheed would meet for 24 hours, followed by Convair and Douglas. About three days later the War Labor Board proposed dramatic pay increases. Boeing complied with the directive.

Following a year of negotiations, numerous lawsuits, and a March NLRB representation election, the IAM finally struck Boeing on April 22, 1948.

BOEING The main cause of the 140 day strike was management's proposal to gut the seniority system. During the strike the Company fought hard to break the Union. The Teamsters crossed the line and recruited strikebreakers in an effort to represent all Boeing workers. The strike ended when the Union returned to work, without a new agreement. In November, 1949 the NLRB held another election between the IAM and the Teamsters. All workers, including strikebreakers, were allowed to vote. The IAM won by a 2-1 margin.

The balance of the book details the continuing improvements District 751 secured for its members in subsequent contracts. The IAM again struck Boeing in 1965, 1977 and 1989 to make those gains. The appendices include the full text of the first agreement and charts which track improvements in wage rates, union security provisions, health and welfare benefits and holidays. Though a bit dull in places, *BLOOD IN THE WATER* has a lot of IAM aerospace history to offer the reader.

BLOOD IN THE WATER by John McCann, published by District 751, IAMAW, 1989 is available in the Local Lodge Library. The library is open to 1781 members during regular business hours.

