



CASE STUDY #2: AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL

Managers often go after those who seem weak or disadvantaged. Gregg Shotwell tells how members at an auto parts plant in Coopersville, Michigan, protected one of their own.

“There was a woman in our department who had attention deficit disorder,” says Shotwell. “It made it difficult for her to learn new tasks. She was often late. She was a thorn in management’s side.”

A supervisor wanted this worker—we’ll call her Rosie—to learn a new machine. When Rosie had trouble, the supervisor disqualified her from the job and switched her to another one, which only made matters worse. She monitored Rosie with constant questioning and criticism.

“The supervisor picked on Rosie because she was less able to defend herself,” says Shotwell. “It was cruel.”

Rosie wasn’t the most popular worker; she often got on other people’s nerves as well. But everyone could see that she was being mistreated. Workers had nicknamed this supervisor “the Terminator.”

A few weeks before Christmas, the boss accused Rosie of running scrap—producing bad parts—and fired her. The supervisor told Shotwell to run Rosie’s machine, but he shut it off and refused. “This machine is running scrap,” he told the Terminator. “I’m not going to get fired, too.”

When she insisted, Shotwell told her, “Fine. I will run scrap under direct order, but get my committeeman [steward], because I have to get it documented that you ordered me to run a machine that is producing scrap.”

Sure enough, the machine produced scrap. “I made sure of that.”

YOU WANT QUALITY?

Next, Shotwell and his co-workers found a way to use the company’s quality-control program. “We had something called Document 40, in which an employee can document a quality problem. This creates a paper trail, and management is afraid of documentation. Since the quality problem couldn’t be resolved without the involvement of production workers, job setters, and the skilled trades, we had control.”

The quality problem was contagious; soon other workers were experiencing problems with their machines. Job setters who were usually quite skilled at making adjustments and small repairs appeared stumped, so they called out skilled trades.

“We explained to tradespeople what was happening. Nothing got fixed,” says Shotwell. “Production slowed to a trickle.”

ON VACATION

Rosie’s co-workers weren’t satisfied, though. “The next thing we did,” says Shotwell, “was take up a collection for Rosie. We wanted management to know that she’s not fired, she’s on vacation. She’s going to be paid one way or another.”

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They demanded a meeting with the general foreman, who said he would meet with one or two members. Instead, all the workers packed the conference room, outnumbering the four managers. Production in the department stopped.

Workers took turns relating incidents of harassment they had witnessed, and chronic quality problems they'd seen management ignore: "Firing Rosie doesn't change a thing." "It doesn't solve the poor quality problems." "She's a scapegoat, not a solution."

"We let them know we would pursue the Doc 40 all the way to the top of the corporation," says Shotwell.

CIVIL RIGHTS INVESTIGATION

Next, people from the department went to the union meeting. The union reps were reluctant to defend Rosie, but her co-workers demanded a civil rights investigation for harassment.

So one by one, the civil rights chairman took every worker, engineer, and supervisor in the department off the floor into a private room to interview them.

"We workers talked, and talked, and talked. We ate up time like popcorn," Shotwell says. Production suffered, the shop floor buzzed with excitement, and management grew more and more anxious.

Adding to the slowdown, union members refused overtime. The Christmas shutdown was approaching, the company needed the parts, and workers were saying, "No, if you can afford to fire somebody, then you must not need the parts very bad." Many people who usually liked overtime before Christmas made a sacrifice.

The workers took up a collection to buy red and black T-shirts. The front said, "Stop Harassment," and the back said, "An injury to one is an injury to all."

"One of the reasons this solidarity action was so successful was that a woman who is well liked and respected, Kathy Tellier, got involved," Shotwell says. "She had credibility. Women, I often find, are brave in these situations. They really understand harassment. Kathy helped to rally the troops, both men and women."

VICTORY

Under all this pressure, management relented. The company settled the grievance and brought Rosie back to work. "The supervisor had to go to 'charm school,'" Shotwell said, which acknowledged the problem and embarrassed the Terminator.

"The day Rosie returned to work, she was the only one, on all three shifts, who wasn't wearing a 'Stop Harassment' T-shirt. Management saw solid proof that we would not tolerate harassment and discrimination.

"I felt really proud to be part of this action. Many people who are not usually outspoken or active or confrontational stepped forward. As an instigator my part was easy. I only had to appeal to the goodness in people's hearts.

"Given time and a patient instructor, Rosie did learn the job she was originally disqualified from. And management learned a valuable lesson: workers rule when they work to rule."

