

Chapter 20

The smelting craftsmen

The notion that hourly workers at the new Anaconda Aluminum Co. smelter in Columbia Falls would be organized with a union under a labor contract was never contested – it was accepted and inevitable for its time. The question was with which labor organization, and would it be under the craft or industrial umbrella. Construction of the Hungry Horse Dam was the first major project in the Flathead Valley, bringing in thousands of jobs and injecting millions of dollars into the local economy. Another legacy was that its construction workers were mostly craftsmen – carpenters, concrete workers, plumbers, electricians and millwrights. Many of the dam workers stayed on to build the AAC smelter, but a key difference was that hydroelectric dams don't employ many people once they begin operating, whereas aluminum smelters typically employ more than 400 workers. Most of those aluminum jobs would be production work, not crafts, but they were not like typical factory jobs. Specialized training was required to ensure that workers didn't get hurt and could keep reduction pots from getting "sick" or overflowing their sides. When it came time to organize the smeltermen at the AAC plant, three industrial unions showed up in Columbia Falls to enlist the new workers – the Aluminum Trades Council of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the United Steelworkers of America of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the United Mine, Mill & Smelting Workers (Mine-Mill). The new plant's workers chose to establish a trades council that joined industrial workers with numerous craft unions.

By July 1952, residents of the Flathead were well aware of the political intrigue surrounding the proposed aluminum plant, and rumors ran rampant throughout the Flathead Valley that a third of the Hungry Horse Dam work force would be laid off soon, amounting to about 400 to 600 men. ¹ On Jan. 8, 1953, H.G. Satterthwaite, general manager of the future AAC plant, said he expected 1,000 workers would be needed during the summer of 1953 to build the plant. He explained that buildings were still being designed and orders for building materials were being placed, and he quashed rumors that plant construction was being delayed. ²

By April 1953, no word had been received about the winning bid for construction of the new AAC plant. To address rumors that construction might be delayed or even postponed, Anaconda's Butte offices stated emphatically, "There is no question but that the Anaconda Aluminum Co. plant will be built in the Flathead." Employment offices in Flathead County reported 850 jobless workers, up from 777 from a year earlier. The Hungry Horse Dam employed about 2,000 workers in 1952, but many dam builders had

already left the valley for work elsewhere.³ From 1953 through 1955, local workers were hired at the AAC construction project whenever possible, many of whom had previously worked on the dam. A total of 117 people were hired from outside of the area, usually because of their prior experience in the aluminum industry, which added 468 new residents to the area. Despite the dam and plant projects, Flathead County lost population between 1951 and 1956. The new workers at the AAC plant found a serious housing shortage, although some vacancies existed as dam workers left the area. Many construction workers at the AAC site lived in trailers.⁴

For many Flathead residents, any work was better than none at all. From 1953 through 1954, Flathead County was ranked 12th in Montana for average wage levels. The state's average yearly income was \$3,482, up from \$3,427 in the previous year. The Flathead County average was \$3,428, down from \$3,492 in the previous year. State figures showed 903 employers in Flathead County and 4,859 wage earners who received more than \$16.6 million. The county had 147 manufacturing employers, more than any other county in the state, likely because of the timber industry.⁵ On Nov. 21, 1952, results from a Columbia Falls Chamber of Commerce survey of 167 potential workers for the AAC plant were published in the Hungry Horse News. Two-thirds of the men who wanted a job at the plant had lived in the Flathead Valley at least five years, and 78% owned their own homes. Half of them lived within five miles of the plant site, and the rest lived within driving distance. About 38% were between 40 and 49 years of age, 28% were between 30 and 39, and 16% were between 20 and 29. About 40% were classified as mechanics, 35% as laborers and the rest as miscellaneous.⁶

On May 15, 1953, a large ad was placed in the Hungry Horse News announcing interviews for workers at the AAC plant were to be conducted at the state employment offices.⁷ A survey of the interviews found that 39.6% were laborers, 8% clerical, 11.1% carpenters, 7.6% mechanics and machinists, 4.4% electricians, 3.1% pipefitters, 3.1% engineers, 3.1% warehousemen and 1.8% boilermakers. The survey found a need for more electricians.⁸ By late May, James F. Smith, production manager for the new plant, had already interviewed more than 650 potential workers.⁹ By June, more than 750 people had applied for work at the plant.¹⁰ All that competition for jobs inevitably churned into conspiracies. In 1953 through 1955, rumors were taken seriously about Negroes coming to Columbia Falls to work at the new plant. Similar rumors began circulating in September 1963 as construction began on a third potline at the plant. The basis of the rumors, according to speculation by Hungry Horse News publisher Mel Ruder, was that Negroes were employed in aluminum plants in the South. Earlier in August 1963, "The Montana Conservative," published by the National States Rights Party of Montana based in Polson, published an article stating that Negroes were being

brought into Libby, Mont., to break a strike then taking place at the timber mill in Libby.

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The construction unions

Ruder recapped the union history at the Hungry Horse Dam in a March 12, 1954 editorial. Concerned about getting as much work completed as possible during the April to November construction season, the project's general contractor, General-Shea-Morrison, wanted to ensure workers didn't leave the Hungry Horse site for other dams being built on the Columbia River. As a result, when one union requested a 15 cent raise, General-Shea-Morrison gave its members 17 cents. The dam was built without a "regular" strike. The labor picture in the Flathead Valley in 1954, however, was quite different, Ruder said. Labor unions were aware that the Anaconda Company was in a hurry to finish building the new aluminum plant – the company had power contracts with the Bonneville Power Administration, and millions of dollars were being tied up without a return on the investment. The AAC plant was also the largest construction project in the Pacific Northwest, and it appeared to Ruder that the unions wanted to use the AAC project as a test case to raise wages across the state of Montana.¹² Two weeks later, Ruder noted in another editorial that the dam required many more workers than the aluminum plant, creating a labor shortage that drove up wages that in turn affected wages across the state. Prevailing wages for construction workers at the AAC site were lower. Once the plant was operational, Ruder said, wages at the AAC plant should equal those at other Anaconda facilities in Montana, but not equal to wages paid in Spokane, Wash., where geography provided lower costs for transportation and markets.¹³

As construction geared up at the plant site on June 2, 1953, the J.A. McNeil Co. concluded wage negotiations with AFL representatives for skilled and unskilled workers for the first construction phase. Wage contracts would be signed with wages typical of union contracts in the Flathead Valley but lower than those paid at the dam project, which was considered an isolated project. Flathead workers would receive hiring preference, and all hiring would be done through union halls. The work schedule would call for a five-day work week, with two shifts per day and some workers working on weekends.¹⁴ By late August, construction payrolls at the AAC site reached \$50,000 per week with up to 575 workers employed at the site, a far cry from the \$250,000 per week payroll at the Hungry Horse Dam during its construction peak. Wages for laborers working for the J.A. McNeil Co. were boosted by 10 cents per hour, in line with the Montana Associated General Contractors pay schedule.¹⁵ On Dec. 16, 1954, employment at the plant site was 1,202 workers. About 1,500 people had applied for smelting jobs, but only 450 workers were needed once the plant was operational, and it was expected that about 375 of those positions would be filled locally. Since many locals

who worked on the Hungry Horse Dam had learned carpentry or cement finishing skills, AAC planned on developing job training programs to teach local workers about the aluminum smelting business.¹⁶

The first strike at the AAC plant was a “one-man wildcat strike” that took place on Feb. 8, 1954. David Rex McMurdo, an electrician from Whitefish, held a picket sign near the plant entrance causing a half hour work stoppage as workers, believing it to be a real strike, refused to cross his picket.¹⁷ McMurdo, a Flathead resident for 26 of his 28 years, had been laid off by Donovan Construction one week earlier. Donovan claimed a delay in the arrival of materials meant McMurdo was not needed. At 7:30 a.m., McMurdo was on the North Fork Road in front of the plant with a sign that read, “Donovan Construction Co. is unfair.” When a carload of workers stopped to ask McMurdo if a strike was taking place, McMurdo motioned in the direction of the plant site and said, “Ask the fellows in there.” As workers took McMurdo’s word that a strike was taking place, cars backed up on the road for more than a mile to the Columbia Falls city limits. Telephone calls were made to the Hungry Horse News and union representatives, but nobody had information about a strike, including Charles Byers, the business agent for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.¹⁸

When McMurdo left and went home, the “strike” was over and workers proceeded to the plant site. A lawsuit was brought against McMurdo by the contractors for holding up construction that included the costs of wages and equipment investments. When contacted, McMurdo never called his action a “strike,” and he protested the claim for lost wages. “It will take so many hours to build the plant, and hours not worked at this stage of construction will be worked later,” McMurdo explained. Byers said he knew nothing about the “injustices and union right violations” McMurdo had complained about, and Byers said he was extremely disturbed by the incident. Wildcat strikes were rare in the Flathead Valley, Ruder wrote, and when they took place at Hungry Horse Dam, they didn’t even rate a news story.¹⁹ More than a year later, in May 1955, with payrolls running to \$150,000 per week and more than 1,200 workers at the plant site, AAC faced another wildcat strike as 114 ironworkers walked off the job over a dispute with millwrights. The ironworkers returned to work the next day with no noticeable delay in the construction schedule.²⁰

Negotiations between unions and contractors for new wage scales at the AAC plant began on Feb. 26, 1954. Common laborers received \$1.85 per hour, and carpenters received \$2.50 per hour. Mild winter weather helped construction efforts, and the number of workers increased by 150 in one week to a total of 900, passing the high mark of 700 workers at the plant site in 1953 and the high winter mark for the dam project. The high mark at the dam was 2,500 workers, but the work force dropped

significantly during winter. Unemployment numbers in the Flathead Valley dropped to 1,300 from a peak of 1,873 on Jan. 21, 1954.²¹ But the wage talks stalled. On March 12, 1954, Earl Simmons, a federal labor mediator, met with AFL representatives and contractors to try to break the deadlock. Union representatives wanted a 15 cent per hour wage increase, and the contractors wouldn't budge. Carpenter locals in Whitefish and Kalispell began voting on a strike proposal.²² Wages in the Flathead Valley, Ruder wrote in the Hungry Horse News, were as high as prevailing wages elsewhere in the state, and a 15 cent per hour boost would put Flathead wages near the same level as prevailing wages in the Pacific Northwest.²³

By March 19, 1954, nearly 1,100 construction workers were employed at the AAC site, half the plant's concrete had been poured and about 15% of the structural steel had been erected. Negotiations between AFL building-trades unions and contractors remained deadlocked despite the efforts of a federal mediator. Papers filed by the unions on March 4 meant the soonest workers could go on strike according to federal law was April 4. The unions had agreed at a March 12 meeting to provide contractors with a 10-day notice before striking. Representatives from the unions and the contractors wouldn't talk to the press, but several factors had emerged, the Hungry Horse News reported. Wage negotiations were underway at Anaconda Company plants in Butte, Great Falls and Anaconda, and the company was concerned that giving in at Columbia Falls would weaken its position elsewhere in the state. At the same time, officials from the international unions were interested in seeing the new aluminum plant set the pace for wage scales across the region. The effect on local businessmen was discouragement in anticipation of a strike. Some businessmen in the Flathead believed that wages in the valley should be in line with wages paid at other Anaconda facilities, and they passed their opinions on to Anaconda officials who acknowledged the point. Wages at the plant site so far had been as high, or higher, than the rest of the state.²⁴

The carpenters strike

Representatives of the carpenters union delivered a letter calling for a strike during a March 25, 1954, meeting between union officials and contractors. The Northwestern Montana District Council of Carpenters, sanctioned by the Kalispell Building Trades Council, stated in the letter that they were not satisfied in the progress over wage negotiations and would go on strike on April 5. The carpenters union's contract with the construction companies had expired March 1; the ironworkers union's contract had expired Feb. 5; and the operating engineers, teamsters, electricians and cement finishers unions' contracts would expire on May 1. Union officials argued that Anaconda had settled a strike at its copper facility near Yerington, Nev., in only 13 days. The

company responded by pointing out that the Yerington facility's contract with the U.S. government guaranteed a fixed price, while copper and aluminum prices in the U.S. marketplace currently were weak. Contractors at the AAC site provided figures showing that carpenter wages in the Flathead Valley were comparable to or higher than wages paid elsewhere in Montana. Other craft wages were believed to generally follow the pattern of carpenter wages.²⁵ On March 26, Ruder suggested in the Hungry Horse News that the AFL's intent in seeking higher wages during construction of the plant was to gain leverage against the CIO in organizing the plant once it fired up the potlines. Ruder pointed out, however, that about half of the 1,100 construction workers at the plant site were workers who followed construction sites around the country and did not consider themselves part of the Flathead community. This applied to contractors, too, Ruder added.²⁶

On March 31, unions and contractors met to discuss which workers would be allowed to cross picket lines if a strike took place at the plant site, including those whose jobs involved fire and plant safety, along with engineers, stenographers, inspectors, clerks and warehousemen. By April 2, it appeared that public opinion had changed the strategy of some building-trades unions. It was expected that 240 members of the carpenters union would go on strike on April 5, but other union workers were expected to continue working without crossing a picket line, leaving about 750 other workers at the site. Some of the building-trades unions had a "no strike, but arbitration" clause in their contracts. Without carpenters building concrete forms and performing other jobs, however, progress on the potroom buildings would slow down within a few days time.²⁷ In an April 2 editorial, Ruder called for a wage settlement in order to head off a strike. Ruder pointed out that there was evidence of rising unemployment nationwide, but wages in the West were seeing minor increases. He called for prevailing wages in the Flathead to be equal to nearby construction areas, but he argued against using the AAC plant as a symbol to be fought over between unions and employers.²⁸

The carpenters union went on strike on April 5, 1954, tying up construction of the new aluminum smelter. The carpenters wanted a 15 cent raise to \$2.65 per hour. Two days later, an agreement was reached between the building-trades unions and the contractors that a single expiration date would be set for all the unions, including ironworkers, electrical workers and laborers. Carpenters union officials reported that other building contractors in northwest Montana had agreed to pay carpenters \$2.65 per hour. Meanwhile, the operating engineers decided to hold a meeting on April 9 to vote on whether to strike all the contractors. The 200 operating engineers at the plant site wanted a 16 cent raise to \$2.60 per hour. The ironworkers union voted earlier in March to strike for a 15 cent raise to \$2.88 per hour for structural ironworkers. Anaconda so far had refrained from participating in the labor negotiations, possibly in

order to avoid influencing upcoming labor negotiations in summer 1954 for the 10,000 Anaconda employees at other Montana facilities.²⁹ On April 9, the operating engineers voted 61 to 11 to strike for a 16 cent wage increase.³⁰

Five days later, striking carpenters withdrew their pickets from the BPA right-of-way for power lines crossing the Flathead River after an agreement was reached with the electrical workers building the transmission line. In the terms of the agreement, the subcontractor in charge of building the transmission line agreed to hire another subcontractor willing to pay carpenters their requested wage if carpenters were needed. A similar agreement was in the works with the operating engineers, but it was considered unlikely that either union would be employed in further construction of the transmission line. Instead of concrete pier blocks, the 234-foot towers were designed to stand on a "steel grillage" system that was tamped into the earth. The carpenters continued to picket the entrance to the plant site, which reportedly resembled a ghost town. Roy Glover, Anaconda's director, vice-president and general counsel, arrived in the Flathead on April 14 to look over the site. Glover, who was responsible for directing the company toward aluminum production, said Anaconda couldn't change the wage status of the carpenters until wage negotiations were completed with the 10,000 Anaconda employees elsewhere in Montana.³¹ On April 19, a proposal was made that the striking carpenters return to work at their old wage until labor negotiations were concluded at Anaconda other facilities, at which point the carpenters would receive pay retroactive to the start of wage negotiations in the Flathead. Representatives from the carpenters union replied that wages for the Flathead should be negotiated in the Flathead.³²

A week later, union and contractor representatives met in the Montana Hotel at Simmons' request. The strike at the plant site was in its fourth week. Union officials turned down the contractors' offer to suspend negotiations while Anaconda completed negotiations at its other Montana facilities, arguing that the question of a wage increase should be settled locally. Anaconda refused to allow a wage increase in the Flathead until the labor negotiations elsewhere in the state were concluded. The strike at the plant remained deadlocked. Meanwhile, a delegation of six women from Columbia Falls entered the carpenters union hall in Kalispell and argued with the officials. One woman gave a union leader "a piece of her mind," and rumors circulating the valley suggested that the women were willing to work at the plant site despite a strike. As the rumors developed, it was reported that the women were wives of either carpenters or ironworkers no longer working at the plant site. On April 28, more than 200 members of Local 911 of the Northwest Montana District Council of Carpenters met at the Eagles Hall in Kalispell "to clear the air," according to union secretary Richard Holter. A minority

of the carpenters moved for a return to work, but they were voted down by votes of confidence in the union leadership and the leaders' decision to continue the strike.³³

The Columbia Falls Chamber of Commerce met to discuss the six-week long strike on May 12. The Chamber came up with a compromise solution where construction workers would work six days per week instead of five, receiving time and a half for the sixth day. That would increase the weekly earnings of carpenters from \$100 to \$130, which would be \$24 more than if the carpenters earned an extra 15 cents per hour and worked only five days per week. A spokesman for the carpenters union rejected the proposal, explaining that it took 40 years for labor to get an 8-hour day and 40-hour work week, and labor was not willing to toss that achievement overboard. Another compromise discussed in private was a wage increase of 12 cents per hour instead of 15 cents, a suggestion insiders felt the unions would accept but the contractors would not.³⁴ On May 20, the vice president of the J.A. McNeil Co. denied rumors that the company had agreed to raise wages by 15 cents to settle the strike.³⁵

By May 21, 1954, the strike was eight weeks old and had cost construction workers nearly \$1 million. In an editorial, Ruder described the strike's impact on the Flathead economy. Living standards were decreasing, with less construction on new homes and less purchases in stores, he said. "Hours not worked are forever lost, and reflect themselves in poorer living standards on the part of the whole people," he wrote. "The Flathead will feel the effect of this strike for years, even if it is settled soon." There were no signs that Anaconda would support a 15 cent per hour raise because of labor negotiations at Anaconda facilities around Montana. Labor contracts at Butte and Anaconda had expired on June 30, and negotiations could last a long time. Ruder was critical of the unions' apparent strategy – several months of no pay to be followed by only a few months of slightly higher pay. He was also critical of the notion that a wage increase for workers during construction would influence wages for production workers once the plant was operational. He pointed out that only two carpenters would be employed at the new smelter once it was operating.³⁶ By May 22, the workforce at the plant site was down to only 13, as the ongoing labor strike curtailed most construction work at the site.³⁷ By the end of May, growing numbers of construction workers indicated they were willing to return to work without a new contract so long as negotiations continued and any wage increase was made retroactive. Standing against that proposal were the carpenters, ironworkers, cement finishers and teamsters unions. Meanwhile tempers were getting edgy for local residents who felt the plant's problems were affecting their lives, too. "We got along before the plant came, and we can get along without it in the future," was a typical comment.³⁸

The fine line between earnest negotiations and loyalty to the union membership led to the resignation of George H. Gohn as president of the Kalispell Building and Construction Trades Council on June 3. Business agents for the six craft unions felt Gohn was willing to accept the six-day work week proposal to settle the nine-week long strike. Gohn was the business agent for the Plumbers & Steamfitters, a small union. The six-day work week proposal would increase weekly pay through overtime, but the unions wanted a wage hike of 12 to 15 cents per hour. The J.A. McNeil Co. also opposed the six-day work week proposal because it would increase the cost of project. J.A. McNeil had submitted the lowest bid, but it was facing a loss after suffering higher than anticipated costs during the past winter. Foley Brothers, the general contractor, was given a cost-plus contract because the plant's overall design was not complete when it signed the contract.³⁹

On June 8, 1954, seven pipefitters employed by Foley Brothers crossed the picket line as the strike entered its 10th week. That afternoon, business agents for the six building-trades unions instructed their members not to cross picket lines. The six craft unions, all associated with the Kalispell Building and Trades Council, included carpenters, operating engineers, teamsters, cement finishers, iron workers and laborers. On June 9, the business agents for the six unions reinforced the picket lines. That afternoon, representatives from the J.A. McNeil Co. met to negotiate with the business agents for the six unions for the first time in more than a month. J.A. McNeil's president offered the unions a 7 1/2 cent per hour wage hike, half of the 15 cent raise wanted by the unions, which was turned down. On June 10, Gohn announced there would be a back-to-work movement the next day. Gohn explained that he had no confidence in negotiations between the J.A. McNeil Co. and the building-trades unions and said he was backed by the president of the international pipefitters union.⁴⁰

The 10-week strike was finally settled on June 14, 1954, when the J.A. McNeil Co. signed a new labor contract with the six craft unions. The new contract would last until Aug. 15, 1955, by which time all of the contractor's work was expected to be completed. The new contract provided a wage hike of 15 cents per hour for carpenters, 12 cents for ironworkers, and 10 cents for operating engineers, cement finishers, laborers and teamsters. Most of the other contractors at the AAC site had union agreements to pay the prevailing wage and were prepared to get right to work. The one exception was Foley Brothers, which was not in a position to pay the higher wage rates. Foley Brothers was locked into a fixed-fee basis with Anaconda and bound by an Anaconda policy not to raise wages at the AAC site while labor negotiations took place at Anaconda plants elsewhere in Montana.⁴¹ As a result of the overall settlement, the 50 men working for American Bridge Co. returned to erecting structural steel for the four 1,080-foot long potrooms. Structural steel was partially up for the first room. Also returning to work

were the Jalmar-Olman Co., which was putting up the siding for the buildings, and Fischbach & Moore, Brown-Johnston and Casey Electric Co., which were putting up the 230-kilovolt power line to the plant.⁴²

The strike legacies

On June 18, Ruder looked back at the 10-week long strike. Ruder felt Anaconda erred in not negotiating with the unions from the very beginning, even if the company had labor problems elsewhere in Montana. Ruder felt negotiations could have resulted in no lost construction time and perhaps even a smaller wage hike. He also pointed out that the 10-week strike was peaceful, much to the credit of representatives from the contractors and the unions as well as the union members.⁴³ By June 24, the work force had climbed to 650 workers and payrolls reached \$70,000 per week. Foley Brothers had not yet signed new labor contracts with the six craft unions because of its fixed-fee contract with Anaconda and had turned to using subcontractors without new labor contracts to get the work done.⁴⁴ Rains interrupted construction of the aluminum plant on July 1. The unions set up a picket line at the plant entrance directed only at Foley Brothers because it had not signed a new labor contract.⁴⁵ Finally on July 20, Foley Brothers signed contracts with the six unions that were identical to those signed by other contractors at the site, and 1,954 workers shifted back to the Foley Brothers' payroll.⁴⁶ On Aug. 12, J.A. McNeil Co. and its subcontractors reached an agreement with the unions for six-day work weeks to take advantage of good weather. More than 1,300 workers were at the plant site, and half started working on Saturdays.⁴⁷ By Nov. 26, employment reached what was considered to be a peak at the site at 1,666 workers. The site had employed more than 1,600 workers since Sept. 20 except for one week.⁴⁸

The AAC plant was not the only place in the Flathead seeing union activity at that time. In April 1954, efforts were underway to recruit retail clerks in the Flathead. An advertisement was placed in the April 30, 1954, Hungry Horse News by the Retail Clerks Union Local 1187 of Whitefish listing the names of stores in Whitefish that employed union clerks.⁴⁹ But a larger effort was underway to recruit workers at Flathead lumber mills – a large advertisement placed in the same issue of the Hungry Horse News by the Montana District Council Lumber & Sawmill Workers Unions of the AFL repeated verbatim the full text of Section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act pertaining to the right to organize.⁵⁰ In early May, a strike vote was taken by members of the Lumber & Sawmill Workers Unions throughout Montana, California, Nevada, Oregon, Washington and Idaho in pursuit of a 12 1/2 cent per hour wage hike. A vote would not be taken at the newly organized Local 3029 at the F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber Co. mill at Half Moon, however, and the outcome of the regional vote was not expected to affect local

workers. Plum Creek, Rocky Mountain, Superior and other mills in Columbia Falls and Coram didn't have bargaining agreements with the sawmill union.⁵¹

A business agent and organizer for the Montana State Council of Carpenters came to Columbia Falls in late May to assist in organizing Local 3029 members at the Stoltze mill. Other union officials asked the National Labor Relations Board to investigate allegations of discrimination by employers against union members at the Columbia Falls lumber mills.⁵² On June 3, the business agent filed charges claiming Plum Creek discriminated against workers who tried to organize a union at the lumber mill in violation of Section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act.⁵³ In August 1955, the National Labor Relations Board ruled that Plum Creek had engaged in unfair practices that interfered in efforts by AFL workers to organize the rest of the mill workers. The unfair practices included interrogation of workers about their union activities and threatening to shut down the mill or curtail operations if plant workers became organized. Plum Creek was ordered to allow the four workers named in the ruling to return to work and to pay them for lost wages.⁵⁴

Strikes at the AAC plant continued in the fall. On Sept. 1, 1954, linemen working on the switchyard and rectifier equipment went on strike. The linemen were earning \$3 per hour, the same rate offered on the West Coast. None of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers linemen were local residents – they generally traveled from site to site building high voltage transmission lines and substations and wanted \$5 per day for subsistence.⁵⁵ One week later, 40 linemen continued their strike against Fischbach & Moore, Brown-Johnston and Casey Electric. Casey Electric, representing the others in a joint venture, served notice to the IBEW that the contractors wanted a labor-management meeting as provided for in their contract. The linemen's contract reportedly had a clause calling for no strikes, no lockouts and no work stoppage without arbitration, and this would make their action in violation of the contract.⁵⁶ The Council on Industrial Relations, which was founded in 1920 to provide a forum for the peaceful resolution of labor disputes in the electrical contracting industry, met in Kansas City, Mo., on Nov. 16 to rule on the case. The linemen maintained they had specialized skills needed at construction sites around the country and were not residents of the Flathead. Furthermore, they said, bricklayers, plasterers and some electricians at the AAC site were receiving additional payments. Casey Electric argued it had set up a shop in Columbia Falls, so that was its place of business. An agreement was reached that provided \$2.50 per diem paid into an escrow account until the Council on Industrial Relations could make a ruling, and the linemen agreed to return to work. The council, which included five IBEW members and five representatives from the National Electrical Contractors Association, ruled unanimously in favor of Casey Electric on Nov. 16 that the linemen were not entitled to any per diem subsistence pay.⁵⁷

In a separate and unrelated incident on Sept. 8, 1954, two electricians employed by Casey Electric were involved in an altercation with their foreman and ended up in the Columbia Falls city jail. In one version of the story, Josh L. Morris and Roy Vaughan were laid off by Vern L. Hall. Later that day, the two electricians and three other men lay in wait near the Bank of Columbia Falls about 5 p.m. When Hall passed by, the two electricians jumped him, knocked him down, kicked him in the face and broke his nose. In another version of the story, Morris was dismissed by Casey Electric for inability to perform his job. He encountered Hall near the bank building and asked his foreman why he was dismissed. Hall then allegedly slapped Morris and Vaughan jumped in to help Morris. The two electricians claimed a number of witnesses to this version of the story. The next day, Morris and Vaughan pleaded not guilty to third degree assault in court and were released after posting a \$500 bond. The two then filed a third degree assault charge against Hall. Soon after, Morris and Vaughan found themselves facing second degree assault charges and a \$1,500 bail bond. Unable to post the higher bond, the two spent the weekend in jail. The case was moved to district court and a different judge. The following week, electricians working at the AAC plant showed their bad feelings about the affair by turning their normal “considerable cussing” about things in general to “cussing of individuals.”⁵⁸

Organizing the plant

In early 1955, while construction workers continued to pour concrete, erect steel, run conduit, wires and pipe, and install potline equipment, representatives from three industrial labor unions set up offices in Columbia Falls and began competing for the right to represent the workers at the new smelter once it was up and running. They included the Aluminum Trades Council of the AFL, the Steelworkers of the CIO and the Mine-Mill union representing other Anaconda workers. In the fall, the workers voted two to one in favor of the AFL union. Relations between the company and the unions during the 1950s were good. The turnover rate among workers was exceptionally low, and absenteeism was negligible despite the long commutes made by many of the workers in winter. The plant also had an outstanding safety record. Apprenticeship and job training programs offered by AAC and the Montana Employment Service were well supported by the workers. Overall, observers cited the low age and high educational level of the workers, responsible union leadership and good company personnel policies as reasons for the generally good labor-management relations. High wages also may have played a part. In 1956-1957, the average annual income for workers at the AAC plant was \$5,500, while the average for the lumber industry was \$4,450. Part of the difference had to do with the seasonal nature of the lumber industry. By 1960, half of the hourly employees at the AAC plant, the production workers, were members of the Aluminum Workers International Union under the combined AFL-CIO.⁵⁹

The United Mine, Mill & Smelting Workers represented most of Anaconda's workers in Montana. Although labor had been organized in Montana since the 19th century, it was not until 1934 that Mine-Mill won the right to negotiate contracts with the Anaconda Company.⁶⁰ A recession and turmoil stemming from World War I had led to the demise of the Butte Miners Union in Anaconda's mines and smelters. The union renamed itself the United Mine, Mill & Smelting Workers in 1916 but had little influence until the New Deal and the National Labor Relations Act helped resuscitate the labor movement in Butte. By July 1933, Mine-Mill had 4,500 members signed up and the difficult process of negotiating with the company began. After World War II, miners and smeltermen fell on hard times as the company cut back production. In 1950, feeling that Communists had gained influence among the Mine-Mill leaders, the CIO expelled the organization from its ranks and gave jurisdiction over its miners and smeltermen to the United Steelworkers of America. In Montana, however, the rank and file refused to relinquish their association to Mine-Mill, the "union of their fathers."⁶¹

Shortly after Anaconda Chairman Con Kelley announced plans to build an aluminum smelter in the Flathead in early November 1951, Mine-Mill sent a telegram to Rep. Mike Mansfield in support of the plant. "This plant is badly needed in western Montana both to utilize power to be developed by Montana water in Montana and to afford employment in the area involved, which now depends upon seasonal industries, and to produce badly needed metal for our domestic economy and for defense," Mine-Mill's statement said. The telegram went on to say that Anaconda's organization and facilities around Montana "will ensure that the proposed plant will continue to operate for the benefit of the American economy, the state of Montana and the workers of Montana and elsewhere in the years to come." Furthermore, the telegram said, the plant "will not have the status of a war baby and fold up after the emergency, as would undoubtedly occur if the plant were in the hands of some company without such facilities as fortunately Anaconda has."⁶²

Flathead residents and construction workers at the AAC plant site were familiar with Mine-Mill beyond newspaper accounts. In August 1954, workers idled by a major strike at Anaconda mines and smelters in Montana began to show up in the Flathead looking for work. The strike took place after the company rejected a Mine-Mill request for a 25 cent per hour wage increase, idling 10,000 workers in the state.⁶³ In July 1955, Mine-Mill district board member Ernest Salvias came to Columbia Falls to argue for higher wages at the new AAC plant. A recent wage increase obtained by the union at other Anaconda plants could mean an increase from \$14.01 per shift to \$14.97 per shift for workers at the AAC plant, Salvias argued. The wage increase translated into \$3 million more in take-home pay per year for all Anaconda workers combined.⁶⁴ The movement toward organizing the smeltermen coincided with the expiration of labor contracts for

construction workers at the site. The labor contract between the six basic craft unions and the building contractors was set to expire on Aug. 16, 1955. The first negotiating meeting for a new contract was scheduled for Aug. 1, and no major differences were apparent as August approached.⁶⁵

In mid-August, as the AAC plant prepared to fire up and begin producing metal, the AFL Aluminum Workers petitioned the National Labor Relations Board for an early election to certify their union as the bargaining agents for workers at the new plant. The AFL represented aluminum workers at Longview, Wenatchee and Vancouver in Washington and aluminum plants in the East, South and Canada. According to Patrick J. Reilly Sr., a vice-president of the Aluminum Workers International, more than 75% of the production workers at the AAC plant had signed up with the AFL. Accepted procedure was for the National Labor Relations Board to hold a local hearing during which the AFL would show that it represented more than the 30% of workers needed to hold an election. Reilly pointed out that a delay in the election could come about if competing unions introduced legal technicalities. He also described a letter he had sent to AAC Plant Manager H.G. Satterthwaite informing him that the AFL represented a substantial number of the plant's workers and requesting that the company recognize the AFL as the sole collective-bargaining agency. Reilly noted that the National Labor Relations Board ordinarily held such elections inside the plant under the board's supervision. The Steelworkers and Mine-Mill were believed to have the 10% support needed to be on the ballot. Until a collective-bargaining agency was established, the base wage rate at the plant would remain at \$1.75 per hour.⁶⁶

On Aug. 16, the National Labor Relations Board held a hearing on whether an election should be held to decide which union would represent the workers. Representatives from the AFL, the CIO and the Mine-Mill unions provided names of workers who belonged to their respective organizations to determine if they represented 10% of the total workforce. Anaconda's position prior to the meeting was not known, but the company could take the stance that the workers were still in a training status and it was too soon to determine a collective-bargaining agency. Mine-Mill representatives included J.P. Mooney and John J. Donovan, both from the town of Anaconda. Their position was that wage increases recently won for workers in other Anaconda plants in Montana should be enjoyed by workers at the AAC plant in Columbia Falls. They also wanted issues of working conditions and safety to be addressed.⁶⁷ The Steelworkers held a meeting on Aug. 29 in Columbia Falls to begin the process of representing workers at the AAC plant. Election of officers took place at the meeting.⁶⁸ Construction crews were down to 441 workers at the AAC plant by Sept. 2. Final wrap-up of their work was expected in late September.⁶⁹ On Sept. 9, the National Labor Relations Board held a public hearing in the Flathead County courthouse in Kalispell to establish an

election process for the plant workers. Until a union was chosen to represent the workers, they couldn't enjoy wage increases seen at other plants. Workers at the Reynolds aluminum plant in Longview, represented by the AFL, received from 50 cents to 75 cents more per hour than the \$1.75 received on average by AAC workers. The meeting was delayed until Sept. 16.⁷⁰

AAC plant managers and representatives of the three unions met with the National Labor Relations Board in Kalispell on Sept. 16 and several decisions were made: 1) since the workers were in the process of determining a collective-bargaining agency, they were not entitled to the wage increases enjoyed by Anaconda workers in Montana, and the \$1.75 per hour minimum would remain in effect; and 2) an immediate secret ballot election administered by the National Labor Relations Board would not be held because of objections by the CIO representatives. It was thought that the CIO was attempting to delay the election since the AFL was far ahead in organizing the workers and the CIO needed to play catch up. The union representatives also wanted to know more about how the new plant was functioning. Satterthwaite was questioned in depth about raw materials to be used and organization charts detailing various jobs. Satterthwaite explained that the plant was doing much better than anticipated since it began operating in mid-August, and he expected the number of employees would fall to about 350 once the breaking-in period had passed and workers were all trained. He said the company had no intention to fire anyone and expected normal attrition would account for the force reduction.⁷¹

In October, Salvas accused the Steelworkers of "stall tactics" in delaying the National Labor Relations Board-supervised election. "The CIO Steelworkers are weak now," he said, "and that is why they alone did not agree to an election that would have selected the bargaining agent before the end of September." Salvas added that the wage increases his union had obtained for workers at other Anaconda plants in Montana could have been already implemented at the AAC plant. Meanwhile at a Steelworkers meeting in Columbia Falls, a motion was made that the CIO contact the AFL and Mine-Mill and together negotiate with Anaconda for retroactive wage increases for the AAC workers. A telegram was sent to the AFL relaying the proposal, and the AFL reported receiving it. Reilly stated that he had heard from the National Labor Relations Board office in Washington, D.C. that Anaconda's position was to hold an election early in order to stabilize the workforce at the plant.⁷² In late November, Salvas replied to the CIO's telegram. Salvas felt that the Steelworkers' request was a ploy to hide the fact that the Steelworkers had delayed the election, thus depriving the plant workers the chance to earn the higher wages earned at other Anaconda plants in Montana.⁷³

The National Labor Relations Board scheduled the election for Nov. 21, 22 and 23. A decision was also passed down from the board that, until a bargaining agency was chosen and negotiations could begin with the company, the AAC workers would not benefit from wage increases enjoyed by workers at other Anaconda plants in Montana.⁷⁴ Then in an action that had been anticipated by labor leaders for several months, Mine-Mill dropped out of the election. According to Salvias, Mine-Mill had very little chance of winning because most of the workers at the AAC plant were previously affiliated with the AFL while working under craft unions during construction of the plant. He felt that Mine-Mill and the AFL shared many labor concerns and worked as a united front in the state legislature and in negotiations with Anaconda. Salvias also felt the Steelworkers posed a threat to labor efforts in Montana. Relations between Mine-Mill and the Steelworkers were bitter as the Steelworkers had attempted to organize workers at plants across Montana who already were represented by Mine-Mill.⁷⁵

“The CIO Steelworkers have established the notorious reputation as a raiding union which fosters and depends on disunity for any growth,” Salvias told local media. “A victory for the steel union at Columbia Falls would be a serious blow to the unity of all Anaconda workers all over the state and nation. This raiding outfit must not be permitted to gain a foothold in our state, and thereby endanger the traditional unity of Montana labor.” Salvias said the continued presence of Mine-Mill in the election could create a situation where no union would receive enough votes to satisfy National Labor Relations Board rules, and the workers would end up with no bargaining agency. Salvias encouraged the AAC workers to vote for the AFL.⁷⁶ As it turned out, a victory by Mine-Mill could have dramatically changed AAC plant history. On Aug. 19, 1959, four years after the election in Columbia Falls, about 5,600 Mine-Mill workers struck Anaconda mining and metals processing facilities in five Montana and Utah locations as they demanded another negotiating session for a new contract. Anaconda operations were halted in Butte, Anaconda, Great Falls and East Helena, as well as in Tooele, Utah.⁷⁷

Remaining on the election ballot were the United Steelworkers of the CIO and the Aluminum Workers Trades Council of the AFL. The Steelworkers’ position was that AAC plant workers were paid 50 to 75 cents per hour less than comparable workers at aluminum plants in Washington who were represented by the Steelworkers. “We expect to get the vast majority of votes because the AAC employees favor an industrial type union,” CIO representative Kenneth Stonehouse said. He also noted that the Steelworkers used a comprehensive list of job classifications, derived from their experience in the aluminum industry, which prevented workers from being shuffled around into jobs they were not familiar with, a situation that was already occurring at the AAC plant, he said. The AFL position, according to Reilly, was that the Steelworkers’ delay tactics were costing AAC workers potential wage increases. The Aluminum

Workers Trades Council was the only labor organization in the U.S. and Canada made up entirely of aluminum workers, while aluminum workers made up only 2% of the Steelworkers union. Reilly presented government documents to show that, despite claims by the Steelworkers, the Aluminum Workers Trades Council represented the majority of U.S. workers in the aluminum industry, and that the council was the first labor organization in the history of the aluminum industry to sign contracts and the first to gain wage increases and other benefits.⁷⁸

When the results came in, it was the craftsmen who won. AAC plant workers voted in favor of the Aluminum Workers Trades Council by 281 to 147. The 96% turnout of eligible voters was considered unusually high, with some workers coming off sick leave to vote at the plant. The entire process took place without any serious incidents. The election results were not unexpected since AFL craft unions were present in the area in large numbers since the beginning of the Hungry Horse Dam project and all the way through construction of the AAC plant. Many construction workers had become production workers at the plant. After the votes were tallied, Bud Ward, a CIO local president, said, "We're all one union now." Al Horn, representing the Aluminum Workers Trades Council, promised to begin negotiating right away to bring AAC workers' wages up to par with others in the aluminum industry in the Pacific Northwest.⁷⁹

In December 1955, Carl Eyres became the first president of the Aluminum Workers International Union, the union that would represent production workers under the Aluminum Workers Trades Council umbrella. Other officers included John Ebing, secretary-treasurer, Dean Larkins, vice president, Bruce Carrier, trustee, Hugh Speer, trustee, and Pat Reilly, union representative.⁸⁰ On Jan. 16, 1956, the new officers of the Aluminum Workers International Local 320 of the AFL-CIO received their charter from Reilly.⁸¹ The production workers union changed affiliations over the following decades. In 1982, Local 320 became affiliated with the Aluminum, Brick and Glass Workers Union. Then in 1996, the local merged with the Steelworkers. In December 2005, Local 320 officers included Brian Doyle, recording secretary, Keith Haverfield, vice president, Ken Dahlgren, president with 38 years with the union, Bruce Pennington, treasurer, and Gregg Jones, financial secretary.⁸²

Negotiating a contract

In late December 1955, an announcement was made that negotiations for the AAC plant's first labor contract would take place after January 1956.⁸³ On Feb. 17, the Hungry Horse News published a letter to the editor from Earl McMaster, a pot man at the AAC plant, in support of higher wages. McMaster compared the high cost of living in the Flathead with that in Great Falls, citing his heating and electrical bills. But he also addressed working conditions at the plant. "I think that a visit to the pot rooms where

we have snow drifts on the floor and icicles hanging from the water fountains, or if you prefer a warmer condition, visit the pot rooms in July when you have to strip down as far as you dare without exposing yourself to burns from hot bath or metal, then maybe you will see why the men are asking for more money and better conditions,” he said.⁸⁴ Hourly employees voted on the company’s proposed labor contract on March 19 and 20. Meetings with union members were held at the Columbia Falls Masonic Hall during both days to discuss wages, working conditions, overtime, retroactive pay, shift differential and other topics. The base rate for the workers at the time was \$1.75 per hour, the union wanted \$2.14, and the company offered \$1.92. Anaconda’s base rate at other Montana plants was \$1.86, and the base rate at other Pacific Northwest aluminum plants was about \$2.00. According to the previously negotiated agreement between the Aluminum Workers Trades Council and the company, any pay increase would be retroactive to Oct. 1, 1955.⁸⁵

The workers overwhelmingly turned down the company’s offer by 391 to 8.⁸⁶ Little progress was evident in the follow-up negotiations, and on April 2 the workers voted 387 to 2 to authorize a strike. The Aluminum Workers Trades Council gave notice to the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service – the earliest a strike could take place was April 10. Union and company representatives met with a federal mediator to negotiate a new contract.⁸⁷ In a second vote on April 9 and 10, following three days of intense negotiations, the hourly plant workers voted 331 to 68 in favor of a new contract. “There was sincere effort on the part of all concerned to avoid a strike,” the Hungry Horse News reported. “Little was said about the construction strike of two years ago, but it influenced thinking and increased fears.” The 27-page contract was signed by Satterthwaite and representatives from each union’s negotiating committee. The average hourly wage increased by 30 cents to about \$100 per week. Total payroll for the plant was about \$3 million per year. The expectation by the Hungry Horse News was that more homes would be built, and residences would have more of a “I came here to stay” look.⁸⁸

The new labor contract went into effect beginning April 10. The base pay for Grade 1 increased from \$1.75 to \$1.98 per hour. Retroactive pay was due to the workers for the time period between Oct. 1, 1955 and April 10, 1956, which amounted to about \$250 for general laborers, and would be paid to the workers by April 20, 1956. Pay day was made weekly – every Friday. Ten pay grades were created. Grade 1 included custodians and general laborers. Grade 2 included junior warehousemen, ventilator men, siphon cleaners, pin contact cleaners, power mower operators and power sweeper operator. Grade 3 included senior warehousemen, payloaders operators, industrial truck operators, raw material unloaders, pot reliners, pin machine helpers, ingot pourer helpers, saw operators, truck drivers (under 2 tons), floormen and oilers. Grade 4

included attendant substation and maintenance mechanic helpers. Grade 5 included alumina unloaders, cranemen, tappers, ingot pourers, ingot firemen, paste operators and truck drivers (2 to 5 tons). Grade 6 included truck drivers (5 tons and over), diesel locomotive switchmen, pot men and pin pullers. Grade 7 included mill equipment operators. Grade 8 included boiler/compressor operators, maintenance mechanics, substation operators, maintenance electricians, diesel locomotive engineers and heavy equipment operators. Grade 9 included meter and instrument technicians, mechanical leadmen and electrical leadmen. Grade 10 was left exclusively for the chief substation operator.⁸⁹

The addition of new kinds of machinery to the plant would require the creation of new job categories, the labor contract stipulated. Seven departments were listed, including the paste plant, potlines, casting, service, warehouse, electrical maintenance and mechanical maintenance. The contract specified workers could be elevated in pay grade by department seniority or by merit, whereas downgrading or layoffs was based on department seniority only. Vacations were provided depending on the length of employment – one week for the first five years, and two weeks after that. Six double-time holidays were provided for. Leaves of absence were granted depending upon the length of employment – one week after one year of employment, two weeks after two years, three weeks after three years, and four weeks after four years. Article 14 covered worker safety. The company was required to provide to the workers all the protective equipment needed to protect them from injury. The company also was required to provide all the tools workers needed to perform their jobs. The contract's 19th article stipulated no strikes by union workers and no lockouts by the company. Foremen and supervisors were not allowed to perform any work described in the contract except for reasons of instruction or during emergencies. An apprenticeship program was established in compliance with the U.S. Labor Department and the Montana State Apprenticeship Council. The company would pay for 50% of a worker's health insurance program up to a maximum of \$4 per month.⁹⁰

The contract was signed on April 10. Hourly wages at the AAC plant ranged from \$1.98 to \$2.68, while comparable rates for lumber mills in the Flathead ranged from \$1.85 to \$2.70 per hour.⁹¹ The new two-year contract boosted the average wage at the plant by 30 cents an hour. Production workers who worked six days a week received time-and-a-half every fourth week and time-and-a-half for two Sundays every four weeks. Most of the hourly workers fell within pay grades 3, 5 and 6. A 30-day probationary period was created for all new employees. The company agreed to cooperate with the Aluminum Workers Trades Council's safety committees and form a joint safety committee.⁹² On June 18, maintenance mechanics met at the Masonic Hall in Columbia Falls to discuss

organizing the Millwrights Local 1586 union. The group had already received a charter from the national office.⁹³

Negotiations for a second labor contract at the AAC plant began on April 1, 1957.⁹⁴ The union asked for a 35 cent raise, and the company offered 7 cents. The company contract also changed job classifications.⁹⁵ Hourly workers turned down the company offer by 402 to 0 on April 18 and 19 and then showed their support for the union negotiators with a 449 to 5 vote at the Paul Bunyan café to strike if necessary. On April 30, a commissioner for the U.S. Mediation and Conciliation Service announced that a tentative agreement had been reached and no strike would take place.⁹⁶ The workers voted to approve a new contract with wage increases of 10 to 20 cents per hour on May 2 after they were told a strike could last six months or more. The \$2.03 per hour minimum wage compared to \$2.01 at Kaiser's Spokane plant, \$2.06 at Alcoa's Wenatchee plant and \$2.12 at Reynolds' Longview plant.⁹⁷

The third contract was set to expire on April 30, 1958, and representatives from the Aluminum Workers International Union AFL-CIO traveled to Columbia Falls in early April to help with the negotiations.⁹⁸ On April 17, management offered to extend the current labor contract for another year without modification. In a letter to the plant's workers, Satterthwaite described market conditions as "bad," with lower aluminum prices and weak demand. An aluminum plant in Washington had laid off 1,000 workers, and many producers were unable to sell their inventory. The price drop of 2 cents per pound was the first price drop in 17 years, and it resulted from price reductions by Alcan. Alcan in turn was reacting to competitive pricing by Soviet and European producers. When the price cut was first announced, AAC asked workers to accept a 7.5% wage cut. Later, recognizing the hardship such a wage cut would have on workers, management amended its position.⁹⁹ On April 21, union representatives met with management to discuss the latest contract proposal and present information to Aluminum Workers Trades Council members. Union negotiators brought up insurance and health benefits in addition to wage increases.¹⁰⁰

The hourly workers rejected the company offer on April 30, 1958, by 307 to 12 and then voted 384 to 8 in support of a strike as negotiations continued. Union representatives argued that wages and benefits offered by AAC were not in line with wages and benefits offered by other Pacific Northwest aluminum companies. By early May, negotiations were considered to be nearing the "critical point" with a May 4 deadline.¹⁰¹ Facing a midnight deadline on May 4, a federal mediator from Great Falls helped keep negotiations alive from 10 a.m. through 12:40 p.m. – a "long tense session," according to the *Hungry Horse News*. Finally, Aluminum Workers Trades Council officials agreed to present the company's offer of an 8 cent an hour increase to the workers. On May 7,

union members voted 267 to 144 in favor of the new contract, which was signed the next day. Nay votes, according to the Hungry Horse News, had less to do with wages than with benefits – particularly vacation time. The plant began operating in 1955, and none of the workers would be eligible for two weeks of vacation until 1960. Gaining two weeks of vacation time sooner was a major issue for many of the workers. With the wage increase, the lowest paid worker at the plant would receive \$4,492 per year, and the average production worker would receive about \$6,000 per year. Wages at the AAC plant were the highest among all Montana industries, but the wages were below those at the Reynolds plant in Longview.¹⁰²

Negotiations for a fourth labor contract began April 8, 1959, with the contract set to expire on May 1. Union officials wanted a wage increase more in line with other Pacific Northwest aluminum plants, along with two weeks paid vacation after two years of employment and increased insurance benefits. Labor negotiations at other Pacific Northwest aluminum smelters were scheduled to take place at a later date, which affected negotiations in Columbia Falls.¹⁰³ In an April 14 message to the plant's workers, Plant Manager James Smith argued that the union's 49-page proposal amounted to an entire rewrite of previous contracts, and that the union's proposals were overwhelming. He noted that the union requested wage increases ranging from 33 cents to 52 cents per hour on top of fringe benefits worth another 60 cents per hour, making a total increase of more than \$1 per hour. Aluminum Workers Trades Council President Harry Mathison countered by pointing out that over the past three years, other aluminum plants in the Pacific Northwest had negotiated labor contracts with numerous fringe benefits and substantial wage increases on top of a cost-of-living escalator clause. Because the AAC contract expired on May 1 while contracts at other plants expired in the fall, AAC workers would always be nine months behind other aluminum workers in the Pacific Northwest, Mathison said.¹⁰⁴

On April 29, 1959, as negotiations failed to find a middle ground and a strike loomed, Smith issued a statement reminding workers about the nature of aluminum smelting – shutting down the plant would be difficult to undo. He estimated that during the six months that it might take to bring reduction pots back on line and producing specification grade metal, many workers could be out of work. Labor leaders agreed with that statement.¹⁰⁵ Management presented their final labor contract offer on April 30 – a wage increase averaging 8.23 cents per hour, a new holiday to be used on the employee's birthday, increases in afternoon and night shift differentials, a 75% contribution toward health insurance premiums up to \$5 per month, and the reduction of qualifying hours to earn vacation time from 1,200 hours to 1,000.¹⁰⁶ The wage increase offered by the company was comparable to the expected wage increase for Alcoa, Kaiser and Reynolds workers during their negotiations in the fall. With the current

contract expiring on May 1, many workers were not sure the plant would still be operating past 11 p.m. the night before the deadline. A federal mediator had failed to push union and management officials to a compromise. Smith estimated that the company's offer totaled 23 cents an hour in increased wages and benefits.¹⁰⁷ On May 1, workers approved the company contract by 203 to 176. When several workers were later asked why they voted against the proposal, the common worry was that the company contract expired on Oct. 31, 1960 – on the eve of winter. The company wanted to move labor contract negotiations from spring to fall to keep in line with other Pacific Northwest aluminum plants and the AAC fabrication plant in Louisville, Ky.¹⁰⁸

In mid-April 1960, the 400 hourly workers at the AAC plant received a 4.6 cent per hour raise retroactive to Nov. 1, 1959, as part of a contract obligation that tied the union's wages to those of the Steelworkers working at the Big 3 aluminum plants. With the increase, the base wage at the plant came to \$2.26 per hour and the top wage came to \$3.11 per hour.¹⁰⁹ On June 3 and 4, delegates from labor councils at the Alcoa plant in Wenatchee and the Reynolds plant in Longview traveled to Columbia Falls for an annual meeting of the Northwest Conference of Councils AFL-CIO. Harry Mathison and David Monroe, president of the Aluminum Workers Local 320, hosted the meeting. L.A. Holley, the international representative of the Aluminum Workers International AFL-CIO, from St. Louis, Mo., was also present.¹¹⁰ With the current contract expiring on Oct. 31, the Aluminum Workers Trades Council presented its proposals for a new labor contract on Oct. 5 and 6.¹¹¹ Negotiations focused on working conditions and seniority. Unlike earlier times during contract negotiations, the workers and people in the community were quiet, and it was assumed the company's offer would be accepted by the union members.¹¹² Workers approved the contract on Nov. 1, 1960, boosting the base wage by 6 4/10 cents to \$2.33 per hour and the average wage by 7 1/2 cents. The company also agreed to increase its contribution to the workers' health insurance from 75% of the premium to 90% up to a maximum of \$16 per employee per month. The plant was operating at 87.5% capacity with 539 employees earning a total of \$3.5 million.¹¹³

Workers ratified a new two-year contract on Nov. 1, 1961, providing a base wage of \$2.37 per hour. Unlike previous contract negotiations, the community was left in the dark as the talks went on quietly in the background. Representing the company were Smith, assistant plant manager Ed Woster, plant engineer Hal Kanzler, production manager Charles Taylor, personnel manager Paul McMaster and Anaconda attorney Joe Woodlief. The contract's expiration date was changed from Oct. 31 to Oct. 15 to allow the negotiators a chance to be away during hunting season. Included in the new labor contract was a company pension plan for employees retiring at 65 with 15 years of service with the company. Also included in the new contract effective Oct. 15, 1962, was a provision that the company would contribute up to 95% of the cost of health plan

premiums up to maximum of \$18 per employee per month, up from 90% and a maximum of \$16 per month.¹¹⁴ The two-year contract contained a reopener provision, and negotiations began in September 1962. A proposal included a wage boost, but details were not released to the press prior to voting.¹¹⁵ On Sept. 28 and 29, 1962, hourly workers approved the new labor contract, which raised the base wage from \$2.37 to \$2.42 per hour, and averaged 8.5 cents per hour for all grades effective Oct. 15.¹¹⁶

The AAC plant's seventh labor contract was set to expire on Oct. 15, 1963, and negotiations began in September.¹¹⁷ On Oct. 16, one day after the contract expired, hourly workers turned down the proposed contract by 206 to 117. The company contract included benefits as well as a 5 cent per hour wage hike across the board. The area of disagreement had to do with insufficient vacation time. On Oct. 18, the hourly workers met to conduct a strike vote.¹¹⁸ The members turned down the strike vote, but the threat apparently worked. On Oct. 22, following a successful negotiation and vote, a new two-year contract was signed by Aluminum Workers Trades Council leadership. Retroactive to Oct. 15, the new contract included a 5 cent per hour wage hike to a base of \$2.47 per hour – and more vacation time.¹¹⁹ Two years later, workers wanted higher wages and a broader vacation policy. Negotiations for the plant's eighth labor contract began on Sept. 22, 1965, with the two-year contract scheduled to expire on Oct. 15.¹²⁰ After two days, Aluminum Workers Trades Council President Max Deaton described the meetings with management as a "wholesome atmosphere." Management shared the opinion.¹²¹ But workers overwhelmingly voted down the company contract on Oct. 13 by 364 to 10. Negotiations resumed the next day.¹²² The company contract was rejected again by a 264 to 144 vote on Oct. 18. After more negotiations, a third contract proposal was submitted for a vote on Oct. 21 – a three-year contract that increased the base wage by 4 cents, 6 cents and 8 cents per hour for the years 1965, 1966 and 1967. It also increased medical benefits and created a new grade level for potmen and tappers.¹²³ Voters approved the three-year contract on Oct. 21, 1965, by 273 to 129.¹²⁴

While workers went on strike several times during construction, they never struck after the reduction pots were energized in the summer of 1955. The generally good relations between workers and management periodically were interrupted by tough contract negotiations, but agreements were reached – in later years with the prodding of governors and U.S. senators. Contract issues typically focused on wages, but they also included vacation time, safety issues and job classifications – the latter a balancing act between the various cooperating craft unions. Early company benefits included summertime jobs for workers' children and apprenticeships for workers who wanted to learn a trade and move up. The plant's workers showed an interest in their jobs, which was challenging at times and often dangerous, and they were rewarded for suggestions

that eliminated a production problem. Women didn't find work in the potlines until the 1970s after a federal law changed, and while a handful were employed in administration or the laboratory, few made it out to field maintenance, pot rebuild, service work or the potlines.

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- ¹ Mel Ruder, "Employment picture," Hungry Horse News, July 18, 1952[AL1451]
 - ² "Plant building may require 1,000 men," Hungry Horse News, Jan. 9, 1953 [AL2273]
 - ³ "Flathead has 850 persons jobless," Hungry Horse News, April 17, 1953 [AL2292]
 - ⁴ Maxine Johnson, "The effects of the Anaconda Aluminum Company plant on Flathead County, Montana," January 1960 [AL0277]
 - ⁵ "Gives information on wage levels," Hungry Horse News, Dec. 31, 1954 [AL2411]
 - ⁶ "Show results of plant job survey," Hungry Horse News, Nov. 21, 1952 [AL1472]
 - ⁷ "A representative of the Anaconda Aluminum Company," Hungry Horse News, May 15, 1953 [AL2298]
 - ⁸ "Job survey shows interest in plant," Hungry Horse News, May 15, 1953 [AL2297]
 - ⁹ "AAC interviews top 650 mark," Hungry Horse News, May 29, 1953 [AL2300]
 - ¹⁰ "AAC job interviews," Hungry Horse News, June 5, 1953 [AL2303]
 - ¹¹ "Negro rumors about again," Hungry Horse News, Sept. 20, 1963 [AL2185]
 - ¹² Mel Ruder, "Wage scales," Hungry Horse News, March 12, 1954 [AL2342]
 - ¹³ Mel Ruder, "Strike thoughts," Hungry Horse News, March 26, 1954 [AL2346]
 - ¹⁴ "Set wage scales for plant builders," Hungry Horse News, June 5, 1953 [AL2302]
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