Chapter 8

Organizing the potmen

Labor organizations were not prominent in the 1880s when the Pittsburgh Reduction Co. was founded – only 1% of the entire U.S. workforce was unionized. The company's first strike took place after the turn of the century, on March 27, 1900, at the company's wire mill in New Kensington, Pa. [1] It was the first major strike by industrial workers in the community near Pittsburgh, according to Carl I. Meyerhuber Jr.'s history of the Allegheny Valley labor movements. Thirty-seven workers demanded a wage increase from $1.50 to $1.75 for 10 hours of work in a day. The company's 10 cent increase offer was rejected. Workers from other departments joined in the strike, and substitute workers brought in by the company were intercepted at the train station and persuaded to leave town. One hundred men joined a "permanent union" and tried to get support from local craft unions. Craft unions were typically made up of workers from a single craft, which could be a skilled craft such as electrician, millwright, iron worker, machinist or heavy equipment operator. In contrast, industrial unions represented entire classes of workers at a plant, including production workers. A settlement was reached on April 4, 1900, with workers receiving a 12% wage increase and a reduction in the amount of work on Sundays. [2]

The American Federation of Labor (AFL), a large nationwide organization of individual craft unions, was successful at establishing a closed union shop at the New Kensington plant until 1908, at which time the aluminum company refused to renegotiate a scale of wages and declared the plant an open shop again. A closed shop was a place of employment where membership in a union was a condition for hiring and holding a job. Another strike was called, but the company, by then renamed Alcoa, was able to obtain an injunction, which broke the back of the union. [3] The Pittsburgh Reduction Co. had recognized the new union – Local 8261 of the Aluminum Workers Union – from 1900 to 1908. The labor action gave New Kensington the reputation as a strong union town to local craft unions, but later events discredited that assumption. An attempt by members of the Glass Cutters League in September 1900 to organize several nearby plants was harshly stopped, with union members fired and blacklisted. In 1901, the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers attempted to unionize two plants in New Kensington, but substitute workers and the threat of plant removal quickly ended that movement. [4]

In 1907, Alcoa moved against the union movement in its plant by replacing machinists with non-union workers. The next year, during an economic recession, Alcoa ordered members of the Aluminum Workers Union to rescind their organizing charter, disband and accept an open-shop plan or lose their jobs. Members of the union quickly complied and voted unanimously to give up their AFL chapter. [5] According to George David Smith's 1988 corporate history of Alcoa, a subsequent economic boom led to an expansion of Alcoa operations into the nearby community of Arnold in 1913 with 2,500 new employees. At the same time, the ethnic composition of both communities changed to include more Polish, Italian and Slavic workers. These "foreign elements" and an Industrial Workers of the World "Wobbly" organizer were blamed by the media for a strike that year at Alcoa's polishing department, with 100 men walking off their jobs. The IWW organizer was arrested and fined, and the strike ended within a week. [6] The attempt to unionize the Eastern European immigrant workers was blocked with the help of city authorities. [7]

Organizing other Alcoa plants

In 1915, a miners' strike at Alcoa's facilities in Bauxite, Ark., was thwarted when the company brought in scab labor from Alabama, according to Smith. A few years later, the AFL tried to organize workers at the company's plant in Alcoa, Tenn., that resulted in the company firing prospective union members. Generally, the geographic isolation of Alcoa's operations gave local superintendents considerable power and prestige. In company towns like Bauxite and Alcoa, the aluminum company built new towns with pleasant, familial societies, schools and medical facilities. The workplace environment involved dirty and dangerous conditions, but many of the company's workers were paid higher than average wages. The higher pay was based in part on the company's perception that aluminum plant work required more skill and training. Poverty was often prevalent in rural areas, and unions were weak. On the other hand, Alcoa had trouble maintaining a steady workforce in rural areas during harvest time and hunting season. In Alcoa, Tenn., the company turned to hiring blacks to fill in for workers preoccupied with family farms. In Bauxite, Ark., strip miners were paid meager Southern-scale wages of 22.5 cents per hour in the 1920s, and Mexicans were imported to work in the deep mines. [8]

In 1916, machinists at Alcoa plants unaffiliated with any labor organization went out on a spontaneous strike. Nearly 3,000 men and women joined them several days later. The workers demanded an eight-hour day with pay for 10 hours, time-and-a-half pay for overtime work, double pay on Sundays, an end to a bonus system and better ventilation in company shops. Alcoa management responded by saying the fabricated aluminum products market was weak at that time, and the plants had been kept open only to provide employment for the workers. The strikers returned to work after two weeks. The walkout was followed by nearly two quiet decades with no labor unrest at Alcoa plants in the Allegheny Valley despite steel and coal strikes in 1919, according to Meyerhuber. During this time period, Alcoa instituted its “Americanization” program, using films, lectures and classroom instruction. As it had done with the four strikes before World War I, the company steered clear of the harsh techniques employed by nearby steel mills and coal mines, avoiding the use of substitute workers and violence. Instead, Alcoa turned to economic coercion, attrition, selective firing and patient watchfulness. In time, however, the growth of large industrial companies led to the development of large labor organizations that drew on a large base of traditional small-scale craft unions. [9]

Meanwhile outside of the Allegheny Valley, labor unrest, company policy and racial prejudice collided in a perfect storm. On July 2, 1917, one of the worst race riots in U.S. history raged in East St. Louis, Ill., after black workers were brought in to fill in for striking workers at the alumina refinery operated by Aluminum Ore Co., an Alcoa subsidiary. The strike lasted for several weeks, but black workers kept the plant running. The strike began over suspicion about high-level corruption in the company and the greed of wealthy management, but those causes were soon masked by racial hatred. According to official reports, 39 blacks and eight whites died in the riot and more than 300 houses were burned. Other estimates put the number of dead blacks at nearly 100. [10]

Labor laws of the Great Depression

Alcoa generally enjoyed good relations with its workers prior to the Great Depression, mostly as a result of relatively good wages, according to Smith. At the end of World War I, the average wage of an aluminum worker was $1,169 per year compared to $1,141 per year for all other manufacturing jobs in the U.S. By 1929, aluminum workers were making about 7.6% more money than workers in other U.S. industries. Alcoa had little trouble breaking the small craft unions – it took the traditional stance that management could arbitrarily hire, fire, set wages, make promotions and allocate work. This power often lay in the hands of foremen on the production line. Labor at that time was a commodity, and the federal government even established anti-labor policies under a pro-business administration during the 1920s. Alcoa instituted some paternalistic policies to maintain morale and to stabilize its workforce through downturns in the economy, according to Smith. It built health clinics, established recreational programs and set up housing and educational facilities at some of its plants. But Alcoa had no formal corporate policy on labor welfare. [11]

American society and the U.S. economy changed once the Great Depression set in, and large industrial unions became a significant force in the American economy. A 180-degree turnaround by the federal government helped that movement. In 1932, the Norris-LaGuardia Act created the right for workers to organize. In 1933, the federal government passed the National Industrial Recovery Act, which provided workers with the right to collective bargaining. The act was ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1935, and in its place Congress passed the Wagner Act, also known as the National Labor Relations Act, which strengthened workers' rights. [12] The Wagner Act guaranteed workers the right to form unions and bargain collectively, and it banned unfair labor practices such as the formation of "company unions" or discrimination in hiring and firing due to union affiliation. A National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) was established under the act and included five board members appointed by the President and a general counsel who appointed directors for the board's 39 regional offices. The regional offices handled the majority of cases. [13]

Significant changes in Alcoa's labor relations began in 1931, as declining economic conditions forced the company to reduce wages and salaries and to stockpile alumina and ingots, according to Smith. Alcoa also wanted to hold on to its trained workers, so it tried to keep them employed part-time. Meanwhile, supported by the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act, aluminum workers began to organize. Alcoa President Roy Hunt responded by convening the first meeting of the Aluminum Association trade organization on Aug. 1, 1933, where he attempted to put together a company-wide wage scale plan. The plan discriminated between men and women, and between Southern and

Northern workers. According to the plan, Northern males at smelting and fabrication jobs would receive 35 cents per hour while Northern females and male and female Southerners would receive 30 cents per hour. The company also developed a Plan of Employee Representation that created local plant councils consisting of management officials to represent hourly workers. Alcoa's attempt to co-opt the National Industrial Recovery Act failed, however, as workers rejected the company plan and Hugh Johnson, head of the federal National Recovery Administration, declared his intention to impose unionization on the aluminum industry. [14]

The Wagner Act passed a key Supreme Court test in 1937. Soon after, the Committee of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was created to represent industrial workers not protected by the AFL, which served mostly craft workers. The CIO and the AFL quickly became bitter rivals, as the two major labor organizations fought for control over the growing ranks of unskilled industrial workers. As the American labor movement grew in strength, it influenced national politics – labor generally affiliated itself with the Democratic Party, and large companies generally affiliated with the Republican Party and other large companies. Alcoa, through the Mellon family, became a conspicuous supporter of the Republicans' big company interests, and Alcoa's relations with labor generally followed the same pattern as other large industrial corporations, according to Smith. [15]

The National Industrial Recovery Act helped spark a renewed interest in union activity throughout the Allegheny Valley, according to Meyerhuber. The United Mine Workers of America, which had been run out of the valley in 1927, returned and signed a contract with a coal mine. By March 1934, the Glass Cutters League had signed up 3,000 workers. In July 1933, officials from the Allegheny Valley Central Labor Union showed up at the gates of Alcoa's New Kensington Works, giving speeches, handing out union literature and urging workers to take advantage of provisions in the act. On Aug. 1, 1933, the Aluminum Workers Union was chartered as AFL Local 18356. Alcoa workers voted 2,897 to 831 for the local over a company plan. Among those who joined were women who objected to being lined up and inspected each morning in military fashion, being subjected to harassment and intimidation, and being deprived of a just wage because of a bonus system. [16]

In the next few months, Local 18356 was tested by company tactics, government policies, defections, short-lived strikes and infighting among union members, all of which cost the union members, according to Meyerhuber. Union membership fell from 3,300 in August 1933 to just 17 by January 1935. In the meantime, Alcoa provided benefits to workers who chose its employee representation plan, which included preferential treatment by local merchants and company foremen. Retail credit ended for workers who supported the union. The company would meet with union representatives, as required by the National Industrial Recovery Act, but Roy Hunt made it clear that compliance with the labor act did not obligate the company to accept specific union demands. Demands for a union contract and a check-off system for union dues were rejected. Alcoa officials had played key roles in drafting the National Industrial Recovery Act's codes for the aluminum industry, and the union was aware of that. In January 1934, in reaction to low wages offered by the National Industrial Recovery Act, Local 18356 members voted 2,757 to 14 to repudiate the codes, but it received an indifferent response from the AFL's national leaders.[17]

Uneasy relations with the AFL

The relationship between Local 18356 and the AFL was uneasy from the start, as AFL representatives bargained with Alcoa without authorization from local workers, according to Meyerhuber. At one point, local union members threatened to throw an AFL representative off a bridge. On March 1, 1934, when the Local 18356 president resigned in protest, 3,800 local aluminum workers walked out on a job "holiday" and demanded a minimum dollar a day pay raise, a check-off provision for union dues and a five-day work week. Alcoa responded by offering an 11% across-the-board wage hike retroactive to the start of the strike and to negotiate other issues once the workers returned to their jobs. The strike was a product of anger and frustration without planning, and it was never endorsed by the AFL. The walkout ended in two weeks, but it opened a divide between Local 18356 and the AFL, a situation well known to Alcoa management, according to Meyerhuber. A new AFL representative was brought in from Pittsburgh, but this worsened the division. Local 18356 made it known they wanted to create an industrial union like those proposed for the auto and rubber industries, and when local union leaders were rebuffed, they threatened to stop paying AFL dues. AFL President William Green responded by founding the National Council of Aluminum Workers in

June 1934. At this time, aluminum workers at Alcoa plants in the South and Midwest were not as militant as in New Kensington. [18]

As Local 18356 continued to lobby for an industrial union, machinists from AFL Local 541 defected from the local, according to Meyerhuber. On Aug. 3, 1934, following negotiations, Alcoa turned down Local 18356's demands. Roy Hunt stated that a check-off was not part of a company's "natural or necessary function," that the company would pay "going wage rates," that a closed shop would violate existing agreements and National Industrial Recovery Act codes, and that seniority rights, dismissal rules and grievance procedures were a matter of company policy and not subject to union negotiations. Local 18356 went on strike seven days later, on Aug. 10, 1934, but it was unclear which union leaders had called for it. Five weeks later, on Sept. 6, 1934, the strike ended with capitulation to Alcoa, which held steadfast with the collective bargaining principles in the National Industrial Recovery Act. Alcoa denied Local 18356 members a union dues check-off, a closed shop or wage increases. This just added to the local's problems, according to Meyerhuber. As membership continued to shrink, animosity shifted from "anti-Mellon rhetoric" to anti-AFL, and accusations flew that the local's attempt "to set itself up bigger than the AFL" was the result of "a combination of booze, detective agencies and communists." The president of the International Association of Machinists warned Local 18356 leadership about observing the "jurisdictional rights" of his union or else face the loss of its charter. [19]

Alcoa management had opposed the AFL decision to charter the local aluminum union from the beginning, according to Smith. The company tried to use its power over local institutions, but this only propelled the labor movement against "the predatory wealth of the Mellons." Within months of founding the National Council of Aluminum Workers, the AFL had formed unions at Alcoa operations in New Kensington, Arnold, Alcoa, Garwood, Logan's Ferry, Massena, Badin and East St. Louis. Further progress, however, was stymied by internal dissension and mismanagement by AFL leaders, who lacked a coherent program for the aluminum industry as a whole. The 10-day wildcat strike in March 1934, without the backing of national leadership, was the first major strike at Alcoa. But company management recognized the division between the local and the national organizations, and it conceded no more than necessary to keep the mines, refinery and potlines running. This forced the AFL's national leadership to join Local 18356 and support the Aug. 10, 1934 strike. The first general strike for Alcoa workers, it closed plants at New Kensington, Arnold, Logan's Ferry, Alcoa, Massena and East St. Louis. [20]

The strike proved to be a failure, however, lasting only five weeks and causing more hardship to the workers than to Alcoa, which took advantage of its stockpiled inventories, according to Smith. Essentially, the company agreed to measures it was already prepared to accept, such as the principle of collective bargaining, but without recognizing an exclusive bargaining agent; to hold wages constant, but without raising them; to refrain from discriminating against union members; and to establish a grievance system, but controlled by management. [21] Alcoa issued a unilateral statement that an "agreement" had been made in which Alcoa was willing to meet with "any of its employees or representatives of any of its employees" to discuss wages, hours and working conditions. But, Alcoa said, "no contract or agreement shall be entered into between the company and any employee or group of employees or their representative or representatives that will, in any way, conflict with or supersede this understanding." [22] Embittered rank and file union members turned on their leadership and gave a sympathetic ear to the socialist ideals of union organizers from Europe. The AFL had traditionally been a conservative craft union, and the growing ranks of industrial workers needed something new. [23]

The emergence of the CIO

In 1935, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the National Industrial Recovery Act, Congress passed the Wagner Act, and John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers, merged eight former AFL-affiliated unions into the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Soon after, the CIO created the Steel Workers Organizing Committee with a loan of $500,000 and 150 union workers to organize the steel industry. The steel union made quick progress – the United States Steel Corporation, the nation's largest steel manufacturer, recognized the Steel Workers Organizing Committee on March 17, 1937, and signed its first labor contract with the new union. [24] News of the creation of the CIO rippled through the aluminum industry, according to Meyerhuber. In New Kensington, officials from the National Council of Aluminum Workers negotiated an agreement with Alcoa in October 1935, but Alcoa refused to sign a labor contract. Local 18356 members continued to criticize its parent organization, the AFL, which it believed was trying to keep aluminum workers "subdued and quiescent." Adding to this animosity toward the AFL, the Allegheny Valley Central

Labor Union was forced to give up its charter to the AFL in April 1936 after it expressed support for the CIO. Local 18356 leaders expressed their support for the Allegheny Valley Central Labor Union. The emergence of the CIO gave unions an alternative to the AFL, and thousands of local workers who had left Local 18356 in 1934 sensed a change and returned in the spring and summer of 1936. Some members and leaders of Local 18356 looked to the CIO as a pathway to becoming an industrial union rather than a craft union and to secede from the AFL. [25]

In 1936, Alcoa signed its first bilateral agreement with the National Council of Aluminum Workers, which represented workers at six plants, granting bargaining rights to the union for union members only, according to Grace Milgram's 1943 history of labor organization in aluminum fabrication plants. In 1937, several local labor groups left the council to organize the Aluminum Workers of America under the CIO. After two years of negotiations and elections monitored by the National Labor Relations Board, the Aluminum Workers of America and Alcoa signed a labor agreement, with four plants covered in 1939 and one more in 1940. During this time, other companies involved in aluminum fabrication or smelting also signed labor agreements. The Bohn Aluminum & Brass Co. signed an agreement in 1937 with the United Automobile Workers under the CIO, and later Reynolds Metals Co. and Reynolds Alloys Co. signed agreements with the National Council of Aluminum Workers and for maintenance workers with several AFL craft unions. [26]

The change in affiliation from the AFL to the CIO arose as relations between Local 18356 in New Kensington and the AFL leadership became heated and personal, according to Meyerhuber. A demand by the AFL for a financial audit increased the level of animosity between the labor groups, and by 1937 the CIO faction in Local 18356 was in the majority. In February 1937, a Local 18356 official withdrew all of the local's money from a bank, and the local's executive board approved the establishment of a CIO account on March 5, 1937. The board blamed AFL "stool pigeons" for the break. Plans were made to hold an Aluminum Workers of America convention. Members of Local 19338 in Louisville, Ky., and Local 18789 in East St. Louis were invited, but the two locals opposed the break from the AFL. Members of the Aluminum Workers of America local in Massena, N.Y. refused to meet with representatives from Local 18356 when they arrived. When the AFL leadership in New Kensington suspended Local 18356 on March

12, 1937, the local's officials refused to hand over its charter or turn over its money. The AFL sued Local 18356 in federal court in Pittsburgh, but the case wasn't settled until 1942 – five years after Local 18356 had joined the CIO, according to Meyerhuber. [27]

On April 12, 1937, the Aluminum Workers of America held a constitutional convention in the Elks Hall in New Kensington with 21 delegates representing four Alcoa plants in the U.S., including Fairmont, West Virginia, and Alcoa, Tenn. The local in Eau Claire, Wis., supported joining the CIO but didn't send a delegate. Union leaders from Alcoa's plants New Kensington took the lead, representing 6,000 workers in 37 different crafts. Members at the convention recognized that traditional craft unions were too divided and too weak to organize the 50,000 aluminum workers across the U.S., according to Meyerhuber. A vote was made to affiliate with the CIO, and a resolution was made condemning the AFL. On June 15, 1937, the CIO granted the Aluminum Workers of America a charter. [28] Local 18356 was voted out of existence and replaced by Local 2 of the International Union Aluminum Workers of America CIO. The National Labor Relations Board certified the new union despite protests and threats of litigation by the AFL. [29]

A desire for change soon spread to other Alcoa sites, including in Alcoa, Tenn. [30] Created out of the former community of North Maryville near hydroelectric sites in Tennessee's hill country and reincorporated with the city name of Alcoa in 1914, Alcoa had made plans after World War I for a 7,500-acre city, complete with workers housing and schools. As in other Tennessee company towns, the new town would be racially segregated. Alcoa kept production at 1920 levels through the Great Depression, cutting workers' hours to 30 per week and reducing rents. With the passage of collective bargaining legislation in the 1930s, however, violent strikes erupted in Alcoa, Tenn. in the late 1930s. [31] On May 18, 1937, local AFL officials agreed to back a selective walkout at the fabricating plant. About seven weeks later, however, while the local union president was away on business, the company brought in scab labor and reopened the fabrication plant. Workers on the picket line attempted to block special police hired to escort the scab laborers into the plant, and a skirmish broke out when somebody fired a gun. After 200 more bullets were fired, two men lay dead and 14 others were wounded. [32]

Tennessee Gov. Gordon Browning sent in the National Guard in July 1937. The strike ended quickly, and workers returned to the smelter and mills. [33] Plant workers felt the AFL had failed them once again, and they invited the CIO down to talk. The CIO eventually organized the local workers, surviving considerable harassment and red-baiting through four elections in order to become National Labor Relations Board certified. Alcoa management resisted efforts to organize, as the labor movement spread from plant to plant, but each time the workers won, according to Smith. By the end of the 1930s, the labor movement had succeeded in organizing the U.S. aluminum industry. As a result, wages increased from 57 cents per hour in 1936 to 70 cents per hour in 1939. [34]

The former AFL Local 18356, the original Aluminum Workers Union in New Kensington, which was reorganized as Local 2 of the Aluminum Workers of America, became the leader of a nationwide drive launched by the CIO to organize aluminum workers, according to Meyerhuber. Representatives from Local 2 traveled to Alcoa plants in Cleveland, Ohio, Fayette, Ind. and Edgewater, N.J. A single industrial union representing all aluminum workers in the U.S. was never achieved, but a nationwide contract between Alcoa and the Aluminum Workers of America was signed on Nov. 11, 1939. Along the way, the union struck Alcoa in 1937, 1938 and 1939, usually without violence – with the exception of a union picket killed by an Alcoa guard in Alcoa, Tenn., in July 1937. The First General Conference between the affiliated locals took place on Nov. 5, 1938, where some delegates argued that problems with Alcoa could be solved by “mutual understanding,” while others credited Local 18356’s aggressive policies as the reason for their success. [35]

Aluminum unions at war

In 1939, the U.S. aluminum industry employed about 30,000 workers and ranked 50th among the nation’s industries. By 1943, that number had increased to 140,000 workers, and the industry's rank rose to 10th. According to U.S. Labor Department figures, the aluminum industry ranked among the highest-paying group of industries during World War II. Hourly wages for aluminum workers increased 40% from 1940 to 1943, but a wage gap existed between geographical regions that the Aluminum Workers of America tried to address by 1942. The War Labor Board granted increases to Southern workers during the war, but no general principle of standardization was ever affirmed by the board. The higher wages for aluminum workers was often explained as a result of the relatively small cost of labor compared to raw materials and power consumption and the need for more training and responsibility. Before the war, labor accounted for about 5% of metal prices. By 1943, labor costs accounted for nearly 10%. Business experts also noted that in a monopolistic situation, as existed with Alcoa, management and labor frequently allied against the consumer. Union workers at Reynolds plants were typically organized by “union shop” rules, where all workers must belong to the union. Workers at Alcoa plants were typically organized by “maintenance of membership” rules, where older workers were not required to join the union but new workers must meet union obligations to continue working. [36]

In 1940 with war approaching, Local 2 prospered, and membership grew to 7,075, according to Meyerhuber. Leadership focused on impacts created by the military draft, leaves of absence for military service and fingerprinting of Alcoa employees. Aluminum Workers of America President Nick Zonarich was known as an avowed socialist but also an outspoken anti-communist, and he was unwilling to conduct an investigation to root out all union members with either communist or fascist leanings. He felt certain that no communists controlled any Aluminum Workers of America locals or sat on the union’s executive board. On Nov. 21, 1940, a wildcat strike occurred when an aluminum worker refused to pay his dues and pulled a knife on a union official. Workers wanted Alcoa to discipline the worker, but management said it was an internal union affair. As word of the altercation spread, 7,500 workers walked off their jobs for eight days. The worker who started the trouble eventually was ostracized and sent to a boiler room in a distant plant, according to Meyerhuber. But the incident raised the issue of “leftist elements” penetrating the Alcoa unions, and the December 1940 union election was dominated by allegations of communist candidates. The outcome of the election did not clear up communist allegations, and the infighting hurt the union. [37]

On March 12, 1941, nearly nine months before the U.S. entered World War II, about 3,000 Aluminum Workers of America Local 16 members at the Alcoa Edgewater Works went on strike, demanding that Alcoa live up to a labor contract that called for time-and-a-half payment for all overtime work, according to a 1941 account by Susan Green. Alcoa paid time-and-a-half for work on Sundays but refused to pay additional hourly pay for any other work over 40 hours in a week. The workers also wanted a 10 cent per hour increase in wages. The rolling mill and fabrication plant in Edgewater, N.J., produced aluminum sheet, rivets, pins, screws and other products used on aircraft and sea vessels, which the U.S. was building for its future Allies and as part of its own defense build-up effort. When management at Edgewater refused to consider the strikers' demands, union representatives traveled to Alcoa's headquarters in Pittsburgh and were turned down again. [38]

The U.S. Department of Labor assigned William F. Cann and the Office of Production Management assigned Leo Kriczski to review the case. The two men asked the workers to compromise in the interest of "national defense," and the workers agreed, according to Green. The demand for a wage increase was reduced from 10 cents per hour to 2.5 cents – the value of the overtime was said to be 2.5 cents, so the total increase was 5 cents, with no provision for time-and-a-half pay. Pressure was brought to bear on the workers to agree with the compromise by both CIO leaders and the Office of Production Management. The CIO asked workers to make a deal in the name of "national defense," and six union officials delivered speeches to the striking workers. The workers returned to their jobs 12 days later on March 24, 1941. New Jersey CIO President Irving Abramson said the union had decided to change its tactics and continue negotiations on a national scale so a wage increase would be available to workers at Edgewater and 21 other Alcoa plants that were not on strike. One Edgewater worker said he believed work was speeded up at other Alcoa plants to make up for lost time at Edgewater, thereby weakening the effect of the strike, according to Green. [39]

By the time the U.S. entered World War II, labor relations in the U.S. aluminum industry were better than in other sectors of the economy. Aluminum workers benefited from the fact that labor costs at a smelter plant were small relative to other costs, particularly electrical power and raw material costs. Before the war, labor costs in aluminum reduction plants added up to less than 5% of the total cost of ingot primary aluminum, and by 1943 this share had moved closer to 10%, but so long as Alcoa maintained a monopoly position in the aluminum-producing business, it was able to pass on any increases in labor costs to its customers. "In a monopolistic situation, management and labor are frequently allied against consumers," Nathanael H. Engle wrote in 1945. "Strangely enough, the most delicate situations have not arisen between labor and management but have come from jurisdictional conflicts between unions." [40]

World War II provided the big American labor unions an opportunity to expand their power over bargaining and basic labor rights, according to Smith. Just as had happened during the World War I, government control over vital industries created an opportunity for labor. By 1942, the CIO had established bargaining rights at Alcoa's plants in New Kensington, Alcoa, Badin, Detroit, Cleveland, Edgewater, Garwood and Bauxite. The AFL, meanwhile, held bargaining rights at Alcoa plants in East St. Louis, Massena and Mobile, Ala. But once war was declared, unions risked serious legal repercussions and public criticism for organizing strikes. Nonetheless, Alcoa faced several small-scale labor strikes from 1940 through 1945. These were isolated incidents, and most aluminum plant workers felt their labor contributed to the overall war effort. In addition, the National Labor Relations Board addressed CIO criticisms by forcing Alcoa to make changes in its wage scale policies and by forcing the company to accept a "maintenance of membership" policy in labor contracts. With government assistance, Alcoa was forced into negotiations over non-wage issues, and in time the company became more accustomed to negotiating, according to Smith. Alcoa's top management continued to resist the unions, but the company had other concerns – threatened with ongoing anti-trust suits, it was tasked with the obligation to produce a strategic metal during a war-time emergency. Compared to other heavy industries, aluminum workers fared much better, and Alcoa management began to recognize that in the future, labor would account for a larger portion of its overall production costs. [41]

An example of Alcoa's reluctance to abandon its traditional negotiating methods is illustrated by a case involving workers at the company's alumina refinery in East St. Louis. On Nov. 30, 1942, the U.S. Seventh Circuit of Appeals ruled in a case brought against the National Labor Relations Board by the Aluminum Ore. Co., a wholly owned subsidiary of Alcoa. The initial complaint filed by the Board was that the Aluminum Ore Co. had "engaged in unfair labor practices" when the company refused to bargain collectively. Points made in support of that complaint included that the Aluminum Ore Co. "refused to make counter proposals," made wage decisions "by unilateral action… although the union had requested collective bargaining," and "withheld from said union information as to pay rates which was necessary and basic to collective bargaining." U.S. District Judge Walter C. Lindley described company-union relations at the plant in his ruling. "The relationship between petitioner and the union had been at all times serene and friendly," he said. "The employer readily recognized the union as the authorized representative of its employees. It cooperated freely in various conferences in attempts to reach a satisfactory understanding. It bargained from time to time both before and after the complaint was filed." [42]

The concern for the union in the 1942 case was that the Aluminum Ore Co. wanted to implement a flat horizontal pay increase to all union members, while the union wanted pay raises that reflected the diverse nature of work that took place at the East St. Louis Works alumina refinery. In addition to typical heavy industrial laborers, union members included office and clerical workers, meter men, lead men, routine chemists, chemist's assistants, and dust, gas and laboratory technicians. "Petitioner, having this far bargained and conferred, declared that it would determine for itself what the wages and rates of pay should be, as it had for many years," Lindley wrote. The company had advised the union that the pay raises "would stand until and unless there should be objection by any individual member, and that in such case, petitioner would permit any aggrieved person to present his complaint either personally or through the union," Lindley wrote. "Thus, upon the apparent verge of complete successful bargaining, the company insisted upon following the plan it had pursued in the past of not bargaining but of fixing increases ex parte, leaving to hearing of future grievances, determination of whether any adjustment was justified. This attitude, manifestly, petitioner believed conformed with its statutory duty. But, to our minds, this was not the collective bargaining required by the (National Labor Relations Act). It was not the giving and taking in open discussion and negotiation contemplated by Congress. Rather, it was a reversion to the procedure of the past." [43]

Lindley noted in the 1942 case that even though the system used by the Aluminum Ore Co. over the past 40 years had resulted in a "peaceful and friendly relationship between employer and employees," the company must follow the requirements of the Act, and the appellate court supported the findings of the National Labor Relations Board in this regard. The court also supported the Board's finding that the Aluminum Ore Co. should not have withheld information "of the pertinent facts constituting the wage history of its members" during negotiations. The court ruled that the Board was justified in concluding that the Aluminum Ore Co. had "failed to cooperate wholeheartedly in collective bargaining." But the court was not satisfied with the wording of the National Labor Relations Board order, which directed the

Aluminum Ore Co. to "cease and desist from refusing to bargain" and then added the words, "and from engaging in any like or related acts." The complaint was specific, Lindley noted, but "like or related acts" was too general. "Petitioner was endeavoring to comply with the act," Lindley wrote, but "it was wrong in its conception of its duty." The company's acts "were not malicious but inspired by a mistaken idea." The court denied an intervenor request by the union and ruled that the Board's order be modified to include a cease-and-desist order as to the two specific practices cited in the Board's complaint. [44]

Meeting war-time labor needs

By 1942, the U.S. aluminum industry began to experience a wide variety of labor problems as it began to expand quickly and needed both construction workers and plant workers, according to Charles Wiltse's post-war report on the U.S. aluminum industry. The situation was compounded by the Selective Service Administration, which indiscriminately drafted potential aluminum workers. Furthermore, workers often preferred jobs in the shipyards, which paid better. The CIO Aluminum Workers of America had long wanted a wage increase and closed shop rules, and these issues were brought to the War Labor Board in the summer 1942 after a strike at the Massena rod and bar mill had tied up production for two days in June 1942 and a large number of smelter workers at Alcoa's Vancouver plant in Washington had left for shipyard jobs. The War Labor Board approved the request for a closed shop at eight of the 10 plants covered by the CIO request but denied a dollar per day wage increase, saying workers already received sufficient compensation for increased living costs. The labor representatives on the board dissented in the 8-4 vote. Alcoa, however, decided to give its workers the wage increase rather than lose them to other industries, but the wage increase was not enough – workers continued to leave the smelters for the shipyards, and Henry Kaiser had very efficient recruiting methods for his shipbuilding business. [45]

On Sept. 7, 1942, the War Manpower Commission ordered a freeze in 12 Western states to stop the "pirating" of aluminum workers, according to Wiltse. The commission called the region a "critical labor area," but the news didn't reach local commission offices in time – smelter workers in Troutdale, Ore., and Vancouver heard about the freeze and left before local commission staff could implement the new order. In the early days of the U.S. aluminum industry's first war-time expansion, the new smelters hired unskilled workers who were overseen by a few trained men from other aluminum plants. The result was the production of poor quality aluminum that was high in iron, as the new workers failed to properly operate the reduction pots. According to Wiltse, it could take six months before a new smelter could produce pure enough aluminum to send it to the casting department. Out of sheer necessity, Alcoa initiated apprenticeship-training programs for smelter workers, but it refused to conduct the training as a joint program with the unions. Meanwhile, the turnover rate was tremendous – one plant with 700 workers saw 300 hires in a month. By summer 1943, many of the nation's potlines were still idle. A new recruitment effort focused on getting surplus workers in the Midwest to aluminum plants in the Pacific Northwest, with Alcoa offering to pay moving costs for workers and their families. By Nov. 1, 1943, seventy-seven of the nations' 80 potlines were in operation, and the three that remained idle were not needed. [46]

By 1943, at the height of World War II, about 90% of U.S. aluminum industry workers were protected under agreements with various international unions. About half were with the Aluminum Workers of America under the CIO, about a fifth were with the National Council of Aluminum Workers under the AFL, about a sixth were with Mine, Mill & Smelter Workers under the CIO, about a sixth were with the United Automobile Workers under the CIO, and others were with the United Mine Workers, the International Association of Machinists under the AFL, and the Molders & Foundry Workers under the AFL. In addition to the role of the National Labor Relations Board in issuing rulings on labor agreements, the federal War Labor Board could issue orders that affected labor agreements – for example an order on Aug. 18, 1942, that provided the customary 15-day "escape" period during which workers could leave a union, which applied to some unions. [47]

Merging with the Steelworkers

In an effort to gain financial and organizational support, the 46,000 members of the Aluminum Workers of America merged with the United Steelworkers of America in June 1944. [48] The CIO's Steel Workers Organizing Committee had changed its name to the United Steelworkers of America on May 22, 1942, during a convention in Cleveland. After nearly six years of divisive struggles to establish a union in the steel industry, the Steelworkers had organized 700,000 members. [49] By 1944, workers at sixteen of Alcoa's 30 plants belonged to the Aluminum Workers of America, but the union's financial situation was not good and it was in debt to other large unions. Anticipating problems between the union and Alcoa after the war ended, the Aluminum Workers leadership quietly promoted the idea of merging with the United Steelworkers of America, according to Meyerhuber. The Steelworkers had 800,000 members by 1944, while the Aluminum Workers had nearly 20,000. The Steelworkers had $4 million in assets, while the Aluminum Workers was in debt. The Steelworkers had 400 organizers, while the Aluminum Workers had five. The decision to merge with the Steelworkers took place at the Aluminum Workers convention in Hot Springs, Ark., in June 1944 without benefit of debate by the Aluminum Workers membership. While some members thought they were "railroaded," they generally agreed it was necessary. Some grumbling continued afterwards, especially when it was believed the Steelworkers reneged on its agreement to keep the "Aluminum Workers of America" name, and its autonomy was actually neglected by the Steelworkers. [50]

The Steelworkers union soon found itself defending its hold on the aluminum industry from attacks by the more militant Mine, Mill and Smelter Union and by the United Mineworkers Union, according to Smith. The Steelworkers prevailed through its strong centralized leadership, rigorous labor discipline, commitment to organized politics and persecution of communists. The issue of communism grew heated during the 1940s as the House Un-American Activities Committee began investigating the loyalty of union bosses. During a short eight-day walkout at Alcoa's Cleveland plant, union workers accused the company of Nazi sympathies while the company suggested communism ran rampant through the ranks of the union leadership. Union workers then proudly burned copies of "The Daily Worker" in front of newspaper photographers to demonstrate their patriotism. [51] The International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers had won the right to negotiate contracts with the Anaconda Company in 1934 after half a century of dashed attempts to organize labor in Montana. [52] Meanwhile, discontent by the New Kensington local became loud and vocal in January 1948 after the Steelworkers suspended all the local's officers and placed the local in trusteeship. Allegations of communist leanings replaced financial malfeasance as the chief issue by March 1948, and the Steelworkers leadership decided to hold a "show trial" to resolve the conflict between local union officials and the Steelworkers, according to Meyerhuber. Trial transcripts show a focus on communist subversion rather than financial malfeasance. [53]

By the end of World War II, the U.S. aluminum industry was highly unionized – from bauxite mining to alumina refining to aluminum reduction, according to Engle. Unions were less prevalent in the numerous and diverse fabrication plants scattered across the nation, many of which were created during the war. Most Alcoa plants did not have a closed shop, and unions instead had maintenance of membership provisions. There was no clear preponderance of any one union in the U.S. aluminum industry by the end of the war, with the CIO holding a slightly stronger position than the AFL. To add to the diversity, the unions within the CIO were not always in agreement, including the Aluminum Workers Union, the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union, and the Die Casting Workers Union. In the Pacific Northwest, the AFL represented reduction plants in Washington at Spokane, Longview and Vancouver, while the CIO represented the reduction plant in Troutdale, Ore. [54]

Post-war aluminum unions

On June 6, 1945, the CIO finally achieved its long-standing goal of establishing a check-off for union dues on aluminum workers' paychecks, according to Smith. Still unmet were the goals of guaranteed annual wages, group insurance, sick leave and the closed shop. By 1950, Alcoa and the unions had worked out ground rules that provided for reasonably peaceful coexistence for 20 years. Alcoa's AFL unions were eventually consolidated under the Aluminum Workers International in 1952, and the AFL unions merged with the CIO in 1955. As an oligopolistic pattern emerged among the Big 3 aluminum producers, negotiations with labor followed suit – Alcoa generally set the pattern for labor negotiations, and Reynolds and Kaiser then signed on. The creation of the Master Agreement protocol ended much of the acrimonious and adversarial conflict during labor negotiations, and put off arguments over economic issues until specified dates when both the company and the union could make their positions known. Throughout the 1950s, most disputes between Alcoa and its unions were resolved at the local level. Between 1946 and 1957, the average pay for an Alcoa hourly worker rose from $1.09 per hour to $2.44, an increase of 123%. In 1959, when a national strike shut down the U.S. steel industry, aluminum workers under the Steelworkers continued to report for work. [55] Another factor affecting union negotiations was increasing manpower efficiency in the aluminum industry. In 1950, the average requirement at a typical aluminum smelter was 25 man-hours per ton of aluminum produced. That figure was cut in half by the 1970s. [56]

Despite labor's increasing efficiency and relatively small contribution to overall production costs, higher aluminum prices in the 1950s and 1960s were blamed in part on unions. In August 1956, U.S. aluminum industry experts forecasted price increases for primary aluminum resulting from new labor contracts that were under negotiation. Strikes had closed several aluminum plants in July 1956 and prevented aluminum producers from posting a record high for the third quarter. A 1.5 cent increase to 27.4 cents per pound as expected would result in the highest primary aluminum prices in 30 years. Aluminum producers had not made an official forecast, but fabricators looked at the situation as inevitable. Prices for primary aluminum had increased 11 times since the end of World War II, when ingot sold for 15 cents per pound. Producers were expected to attribute price increases not only to higher labor costs but also to increases in the costs for materials and services. Costs for building new facilities to meet rising demand also were rising, as a result of higher steel prices and other materials. Total capacity in 1956 was about 1.7 million tons per year, with nearly 650,000 tons in expansion underway. [57]

On Aug. 1, 1958, Alcoa announced a price increase of about 7/10 cents per pound for primary aluminum after similar announcements by Reynolds, Olin and Revere. Analysts expected that Anaconda and Kaiser would follow with their own price increases. One reason given for the price increase was the impact of depressed prices since April 1, 1958, which were caused by global aluminum markets. The lower prices had meant increased sales of aluminum for U.S. producers, but combined earnings fell by 22%. Another consideration was an increase in labor costs by 18 to 20 cents per hour effective Aug. 1, 1958, resulting from a 1956 labor contract that provided a three-year no-strike agreement. [58]

Unions negotiated new labor contracts with major U.S. aluminum producers in spring 1965 that increased wages about 4.1%, well above President Lyndon Johnson's guidepost figure of 3.2%. By November, U.S. aluminum producers had announced price increases for primary aluminum and partially blamed the increases on higher labor costs. The price increase was the third for the year. The price structure for aluminum in the U.S. was determined by four integrated producers – Alcoa, Reynolds, Kaiser and Olin Mathieson – in what economists called a classic oligopoly. [59] On Nov. 1, 1965, Johnson brought pressure on U.S. producers to rescind their price increases. He had been struggling for some time to control inflation and reportedly grew “sputtering mad” by the producers’ announcements. The producers had been seeking higher aluminum prices for some time in order to offset increased costs from new labor contracts with the Steelworkers and the Aluminum Workers Union. [60]

The Steelworkers continued to merge with non-ferrous industrial unions after the war. In 1967, the 40,000 members of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers merged with the Steelworkers. An eight-and-one-half month long strike in the copper industry took place in the summer and fall of 1967 involving 37,000 Steelworkers members. The strike ended with the largest labor contract package in the copper industry’s history. In 1996, the Steelworkers union was affiliated with the Federation of Aluminum Sector Unions and the Aluminum, Brick and Glass Workers International Union. [61] One of the Steelworkers’ most renowned members may have been Michael Manley, who was elected prime minister of Jamaica in 1972, 1976 and 1989. Manley joined the labor movement three years after graduating from the London School of Economics in 1952. During the next 20 years, he was a Steelworkers local union president, president of the National Workers Union of Jamaica and the first president of the Caribbean Mine Workers Federation. Manley spent much of his life watching over the rapidly developing bauxite and alumina refining industry on his Caribbean island, including combating the influence of global commodities trader Marc Rich on Jamaican politics. Manley died on March 6, 1997. [62]

Discrimination cases became more common as workers became organized. In March 1979, an employment discrimination case was brought to a federal court in Georgia involving a fabrication plant owned by the Anaconda Company. The American Metal Arts Co. began fabricating aluminum building products in Atlanta around 1944. The company moved to a new factory in Fulton County in 1959. Anaconda acquired the company in 1962 and retained the trade name Amarlite. The plant’s 500 workers manufactured architectural products, window and door frames, storefronts and curtain walls for large buildings by extruding large aluminum ingots through dies into shaped products, then cutting and anodizing the shapes. The discrimination case was brought after black union members claimed they didn't have a fair share of the positions in the company's hierarchical organization – white workers held all the positions in the top 15 job categories, including crafts such as machinists or electricians, while black workers overall made up 41% of the bargaining unit. The federal court looked at statistical evidence throughout the 1970s and ruled that the black workers had not established a prima facie case of employment discrimination. [63]

The Steelworkers strike at Kaiser

In some cases, the power of the Steelworkers played significant roles in the survival of large aluminum producers that were already facing financial difficulties. Such was the case with the Kaiser Aluminum Co. In 1983, when Kaiser was in financial trouble, the Steelworkers released the company from its obligations under the union's coordinated agreements with the Big 3 aluminum producers – Alcoa, Reynolds and Kaiser. The union gave up hundreds of millions of dollars in wages and benefits, and members took shares in the company's preferred stock instead of wages. The union understood this was meant to be a temporary measure, but between 1983 and 1998, two leveraged buyouts and a flood of cheap aluminum from former Soviet republics put Kaiser in even worse financial condition. Despite these problems, Kaiser earned $168 million in 1997. Contract negotiations opened up at five Kaiser aluminum plants in Spokane, Wash., Newark, Ohio, Gramercy, La., and Tacoma, Wash. in September 1998. [64]

According to the Steelworkers' account, Kaiser began to prepare for a strike at the Mead smelter in Spokane and the rolling mill in nearby Trentwood before bargaining even began and then insisted that the final contract would be on Kaiser's terms, not the union's. Similar things happened to negotiations for the Master Agreement contract covering all five of the company's plants. The Steelworkers claimed that Kaiser spent $8 million preparing for the strike, including hiring strikebreakers and paramilitary security guards, building fences, erecting trailers and paying lawyers and consultants. Kaiser insisted on permanently eliminating 178 jobs at the Trentwood rolling mill, 131 at the Mead smelter, 57 jobs at the Gramercy alumina refinery, 20 jobs at the Newark fabrication plant and 32 at the Tacoma smelter. Kaiser also wanted to contract out any and all work at the plants – from janitors and painters to diesel mechanics and laborers. The Kaiser contract would eliminate existing profit-sharing, gain-sharing and metal-price bonus plans but provide workers a wage increase of $1.50 per hour. The Steelworkers claimed that the wage increase was less than the remaining benefits – Kaiser's pension plan would pay $150 less per month than plans available at Reynolds and Alcoa, and health insurance would be capped at the 1999 coverage level. [65]

Labor talks eventually failed. On March 25, 1985, union workers Spokane, Trentwood and Tacoma voted to accept a wage and benefits cut of $4.50 per hour to help the company keep operating. In return, workers would receive a special issue of Kaiser's preferred stock at the rate of 83 cents on each dollar lost in wages and benefits. The stock would be held in a trust until 1988 or until the worker either retired or died. [66] Then on Sept. 30, 1998, about 3,000 Steelworkers members at five of Kaiser's plants went on strike. Kaiser continued to operate the plants by using salaried employees and temporary replacement workers. [67] The call for a strike came after a prior labor agreement had expired following 16 days of bargaining talks. Kaiser claimed efforts the company had made to invest in new technology and plant equipment, including streamlining operations and reducing the impact of downturns in the price cycles for alumina and primary aluminum, required a fair and reasonable labor contract to make the company competitive. Kaiser management said operations continued without interruption after the strike began through the use of temporary workers, salaried employees, retirees and others. [68] On Oct. 1, 1998, Kaiser announced that it had partially shut down one potline in Tacoma and two potlines at Mead. [69]

One day after Steelworkers members voted to strike, the presidents of the five locals announced their reasons. These included 1) unfair labor practices by Kaiser, such as not providing production information to unions for bargaining, making a contract settlement contingent on not striking and thus taking away workers' right to strike, proposing to take away pension service in retaliation for striking, and refusing to bargain over mandatory subjects such as safety and work protocols; 2) eliminating 400 workers at five Kaiser plants by job combination and job elimination; 3) contracting out work; 4) capping health insurance benefits; 5) offering inadequate pension increases; 6) proposing a five-year contract that was too long; 7) offering wage increases over five years that were less than inflation; 8) wholesale gutting of union seniority systems for overtime, vacation scheduling, shift scheduling and other things; and 9) imposition of a skill-based pay system which would give the company the right to periodically test workers and fire those who failed. [70]

On Oct. 2, 1998, Kaiser contacted the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Services for mediation services, and right away the union charged Kaiser's employment service, Labor Ready Inc., with illegally hiring and recruiting out-of-state replacement workers. Negotiations continued for the next several months. [71] Steelworkers representatives walked out of a bargaining meeting in San Francisco on Dec. 17, 1998, that was held to allow Kaiser to respond to a labor contract proposal the union had presented on Dec. 1, 1998. Kaiser revised its Sept. 30, 1998, labor contract proposal and then offered a $1,000 signing bonus, over the previous $750 offer; a $3.13 per hour wage increase, over the previous $2.75 offer; the creation of high-skilled job classifications that would pay more; an increase in the pension benefit plan; and improvements to vision and dental plans. [72] On Jan. 13, 1999, the Steelworkers made an unconditional offer to return to work under the terms of the old agreement, but Kaiser rejected the offer the next day, saying it planned to continue operating the plants with salaried workers and temporary replacement workers. [73] The company imposed a lockout on Jan. 14, 1999, after the union offered to return to work without a contract. [74] In explaining why they went on strike, Steelworkers leaders claimed that all five of the plants had seen record performance levels in 1997. [75] A Kaiser spokesperson said "we believe that the lockout is necessary to persuade the union to embrace the legitimate proposals Kaiser has made during the bargaining." The union said it would file unfair labor practice charges. [76]

A U.S. Department of Labor writer described the bitter two-year-long labor dispute that followed as "prolonged, almost intractable." The strike, involving 2,900 workers and 1.4 million days of worker idleness, ended on Sept. 18, 2000, following binding arbitration. The dispute resulted in the loss of 540 jobs and was the longest and largest lockout in the Steelworkers' 58-year history. Only once prior to 1998 had bargaining between Kaiser and the Steelworkers resulted in a work stoppage. Kaiser said from the beginning that it needed to make several productivity improvements because it was a medium-sized aluminum producer in a competitive market. In particular, the company wanted to eliminate about 400 jobs, cap contributions to retirees' health insurance premiums, eliminate seniority overtime, contract out jobs like janitors, painters, diesel mechanics and laborers, and customize bargaining for each plant because of each plant's unique operations and labor market. The Steelworkers reminded Kaiser that when Kaiser was facing tough times in the 1980s, union workers had agreed to concessions worth millions of dollars and accepted shares of company stock as a portion of their wages. Now that the company had returned to profitability, the union wanted to be repaid for 15 years of sacrifices. The union also wanted increased security for its members and to gain wage and benefit parity with Alcoa and Reynolds workers. The union also claimed Kaiser was more interested in provoking a strike than bargaining fairly, claiming Kaiser had prepared for a strike by advertising for replacement workers before negotiations began. The union also claimed Kaiser was taking money that union workers had earned and repackaging it as a wage increase. [77]

Kaiser announced on its company website that "it was imposing a lockout to support its bargaining position and that it intended to continue operating the plants with salaried employees and temporary replacement workers, as it has since the strike began on Sept. 30, 1998." [78] But Kaiser's strike plan didn't go off without a hitch – one union official claimed that turnover rate among replacement workers was 70%, and that productivity and quality were suffering at the Kaiser plants. In March 1999, representatives from Kaiser and the union agreed to resume negotiations.[79] In January 1999, Kaiser reported a loss of $50 million as a result of the strike. The Steelworkers responded that the $50 million was less than the cost of the union's contract offer and criticized Kaiser for mismanagement. The money could have been better spent on improving operations, the union claimed. [80]

The Steelworkers also criticized Kaiser for escalating its fight against the union with a lockout and bringing in workers from Pacific Lumber Co. mills. Both Pacific Lumber and Kaiser were owned by MAXXAM, a large corporation with Texas oil roots headed up by Charles Hurwitz. The Steelworkers responded by setting up picket lines at docks in Tacoma where alumina was unloaded from ships. The union also reluctantly turned to other groups outside the mainstream labor movement for help, including International Workers of the World, EarthFirst and some independent anarchists. Both the IWW and EarthFirst were already active against MAXXAM because of its Pacific Lumber activities. Some Steelworkers members had also played significant roles in the anti-World Trade Organization protests in Seattle known as the "Battle for Seattle." IWW members set up a picket line at Pier 7 in Tacoma, and EarthFirst members took over a crane and conveyor belt. The actions were honored by waterfront workers who were members of the International Longshore Workers Union. Some union longshoremen were already members of IWW and anarchist groups. The transport ship Sea Diamond, loaded with alumina, was delayed for 24 hours. Believing Kaiser was not going to negotiate in good faith, the strikers made plans for a complete blockage of alumina deliveries. [81]

On July 16, 1999, the National Labor Relations Board's regional office in Oakland, Calif., dismissed all 24 of the Steelworkers' charges of unfair labor practices. The union appealed the ruling to National Labor Relations Board's national office. On April 26, 2000, the national office announced it intended to rule that Kaiser's lockout was a violation of U.S. labor laws, bolstering the union's bargaining position. On June 6, 2000, the National Labor Relations Board's Oakland office formally charged Kaiser with illegally locking out the union workers, unlawfully discriminating against employees to discourage membership in the union, and failing and refusing to bargain in good faith. The Oakland office said it would seek full back pay and benefits for striking employees from Jan. 14, 1999 on. [82] Meanwhile, Steelworkers members were considering a vote to totally block alumina shipments in Tacoma, but the chairman of the Steelworkers' negotiating committee told workers it was better to return to the table. A membership vote on continuing talks took place on July 12-13, 2000. About 74% of the 1,681 workers voted for arbitration, while 601 voted against it. It was believed that those who voted in favor of arbitration did so reluctantly, thinking there was little chance of winning a protracted strike. [83]

Both sides tendered their final contract offers to an arbitration panel as their "last, best offers" on the various issues on Aug. 21-24, 2000. The arbitration panel issued a final and binding decision on issues in six broad categories on Sept. 18, 2000. The panel found in favor of the union in two categories – retiree health insurance and contract language – and in favor of Kaiser in four other categories. The union received $12 million in severance and supplemental unemployment benefits for the 500 agreed-upon job reductions, but the arbitration panel rejected a $4 million loan to recharge a supplemental unemployment benefits fund. [84] The union workers got a wage and benefit hike of 2.6% per year over five years, and Kaiser was allowed to cut 500 union jobs, about 19% of its workforce, in Ohio, Louisiana and Washington. By June, however, a new and much bigger problem overshadowed the labor dispute – the West Coast Energy Crisis was driving power prices in some cases from $20 per megawatt-hour to $250 and even $4,000, causing rolling blackouts in California and forcing curtailments at aluminum smelters across the Pacific Northwest. Looking back, business writers suggested Kaiser's interest in downsizing was in reaction to the energy crisis as well as to break the union. But in the end, Kaiser made $485 million reselling power from its idled Washington plants to the federal Bonneville Power Administration. [85] The Steelworkers wanted to cushion the layoff of 350 workers idled by the energy crisis, but the arbitration panel rejected that issue. On Oct. 1, 2000, some but not all of the union workers went back to work. [86]

The National Labor Relations Board, a creation of the Great Depression, remained active more than eight decades later, but its support for labor was not as strong as in the 1930s and 1940s. More than 4,000 charges of unfair labor practices were filed with the Board against the top 50 Fortune 500 corporations from 1982 through September 1990. The Board ruled that unfair labor practices had taken place in only 2% of those cases. The vast majority of the cases involved workers who were fired for engaging in union activities. Of the 80 cases decided in favor of workers, "formal settlements" took place in which a company admitted to a violation of law and agreed to provide some sort of compensation to the petitioning worker, such as back pay. Of the 4,000-plus cases, 37% of the charges filed by workers were never investigated and 25% were withdrawn. In a case where a petition was withdrawn, it was usually on the advice from the Board that no complaint would be issued. Some cases were still pending after three years and this, according to union spokesmen, helped deter labor organization as much as firing by the employer. [87]

[1] George David Smith, “From Monopoly to Competition, The Transformations of Alcoa, 1888-1986,” 1988 [AL1284]
[2] Carl I. Meyerhuber Jr., “Organizing Alcoa: The Aluminum Workers Union in Pennsylvania’s Allegheny Valley, 1900-1971,” Pennsylvania History, A Journal of Mid-Atlantic studies, Vol. 48 No. 3, July 1981 [AL5088]
[3] Smith, 1988 [AL1284]
[4] Meyerhuber, July 1981 [AL5088]
[5] Meyerhuber, July 1981 [AL5088]
[6] Meyerhuber, July 1981 [AL5088]
[7] Smith, 1988 [AL1284]
[8] Smith, 1988 [AL1284]
[9] Meyerhuber, July 1981 [AL5088]
[10] “Dry, weary years into a new St. Louis (1915-1930),” St. Louis 250 online, Oct. 9, 2015 [AL4971]
[11] Smith, 1988 [AL1284]
[12] Smith, 1988 [AL1284]
[13] Robert Weissman and Jim Sugarman, “Replacing the union: Business’s labor offensive,” “2 percent justice for workers,” and “Replacing the right to strike,” Multinational Monitor, April 1991 [AL0144]
[14] Smith, 1988 [AL1284]
[15] Smith, 1988 [AL1284]
[16] Meyerhuber, July 1981 [AL5088]
[17] Meyerhuber, July 1981 [AL5088]
[18] Meyerhuber, July 1981 [AL5088]
[19] Meyerhuber, July 1981 [AL5088]
[20] Smith, 1988 [AL1284]
[21] Smith, 1988 [AL1284]
[22] Grace Milgram, “Union agreements in the aluminum fabrication industry,” Bulletin No. 760, Monthly Labor Review, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, December 1943 [AL5019]
[23] Smith, 1988 [AL1284]
[24] “A brief history of the United Steelworkers of America,” United Steelworkers online, April 15, 2000 [AL1299]
[25] Meyerhuber, July 1981 [AL5088]
[26] Milgram, December 1943 [AL5019]
[27] Meyerhuber, July 1981 [AL5088]
[28] Meyerhuber, July 1981 [AL5088]
[29] Smith, 1988 [AL1284]
[30] Smith, 1988 [AL1284]
[31] Tara Mitchell Mielnik, “Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture, Alcoa, Inc. (Aluminum Company of America),” Tennessee Historical Society online, Jan. 1, 2010 [AL5017]
[32] Smith, 1988 [AL1284]
[33] Mielnik, Jan. 1, 2010 [AL5017]
[34] Smith, 1988 [AL1284]
[35] Meyerhuber, July 1981 [AL5088]
[36] Paul Timothy Hendershot, “The aluminum industry of the United States, 1940-1947,” Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1947 [AL5649]
[37] Meyerhuber, July 1981 [AL5088]
[38] Susan Green, “‘National defense’ used to break Alcoa strike,” Labor Action, March 31, 1941 [AL5032]
[39] Green, March 31, 1941 [AL5032]
[40] Nathanael H. Engle, “Aluminum, An Industrial Marketing Appraisal,” 1945 [AL1358]
[41] Smith, 1988 [AL1284]
[42] Judge Walter C. Lindley, Aluminum Ore Co. v. National Labor Relations Board, 131 F.2d 485 (7th Cir. 1942), Nov. 30, 1942 [AL5262]
[43] Lindley, 1942 [AL5262]
[44] Lindley, 1942 [AL5262]
[45] Charles Wiltse, “Aluminum policies of the War Production Board and predecessor agencies, May 1940 to November 1945,” July 15, 1945 [AL5396]

[46] Wiltse, July 15, 1945 [AL5396]
[47] Milgram, December 1943 [AL5019]
[48] Smith, 1988 [AL1284]
[49] United Steelworkers of America online, April 15, 2000 [AL1299]
[50] Meyerhuber, July 1981 [AL5088]
[51] Smith, 1988 [AL1284]
[52] Laurie K. Mercier, "'The stack dominated our lives,' Metals manufacturing in four Montana communities," Montana, The Magazine of Western History, April 1988 [AL0858]
[53] Meyerhuber, July 1981 [AL5088]
[54] Engle, 1945 [AL1358]
[55] Smith, 1988 [AL1284]
[56] "Aluminum products and production," The New Encyclopedia Britannica, 1974 [AL0476]
[57] Jack R. Ryan, "Aluminum to go up," New York Times, Aug. 5, 1956 [AL1217]
[58] "Increase noted in aluminum prices," Hungry Horse News, Aug. 8, 1958 [AL1688]
[59] "Aluminum price rise," New York Times, Nov. 5, 1965 [AL1254]
[60] John D. Pomfret, "Johnson, angry, moves to retain aluminum price, parley is called, officials will discuss stockpile sales to prevent a rise," New York Times, Nov. 1, 1965 [AL1253]
[61] United Steelworkers online, April 15, 2000 [AL1299]
[62] "Steelworker Michael Manley dies," Steel Labor online, March 1997 [AL0160]
[63] Harris v. Anaconda Aluminum Co., 479 F. Supp. 11, D.C. Ga. 1979, March 30, 1979 [AL3893]
[64] "Why we're on strike at Kaiser Aluminum," United Steelworkers of America online, 1998 [AL0072]
[65] United Steelworkers of America online, 1998 [AL0072]
[66] "Kaiser workers take cuts in wages, benefits," Hungry Horse News, March 28, 1985 [AL2638]
[67] "Kaiser Aluminum confirms its understanding that all NLRB charges to be dismissed," Kaiser online, July 15, 1999 [AL0295]
[68] "Five Kaiser Aluminum plants struck by USWA; Plant operations to continue without interruption," Kaiser online, Sept. 30, 1998 [AL0291]
[69] "Kaiser Aluminum announces partial curtailment at northwest smelters due to USWA strike," Kaiser online, Oct. 1, 1998 [AL0292]
[70] David Foster, "Why we are on strike at Kaiser," United Steelworkers of America online, January 1999 [AL0163]
[71] Edward J. Wasilewski, Jr., "A look back at the Kaiser Aluminum and United Steelworkers dispute," U.S. Department of Labor online, Jan. 30, 2003 [AL3478]
[72] "Kaiser Aluminum offers revised comprehensive proposal for new collective bargaining agreement despite union walkout on meeting," Kaiser online, Dec. 17, 1998 [AL0293]
[73] Wasilewski, 2003 [AL3478]
[74] Kaiser online, July 15, 1999 [AL0295]
[75] "Kaiser Aluminum's unfair contract demands bring return of striking Steelworkers to Kaiser's Pleasanton headquarters," United Steelworkers of America online, Jan. 6, 1999 [AL0164]
[76] Wasilewski, 2003 [AL3478]
[77] Wasilewski, 2003 [AL3478]
[78] "Kaiser Aluminum declines union offer of return to work," Kaiser online, Jan. 14, 1999 [AL0294]
[79] Julie Sullivan and Bert Caldwell, "Kaiser talks will resume," Spokane Spokesman-Review, March 16, 1999 [AL0165]
[80] "Kaiser reports loss, lowers expectations for micromill," Platt's Metals Week. Feb. 1, 1999[AL0074]
[81] Robby Barnes and Sylvie Kashdan, "Summing up the Kaiser strike and lockout 1998-2000," Anarchist labor online, August 2002 [AL3253]
[82] Wasilewski, 2003 [AL3478]
[83] Barnes and Kashdan, 2002 [AL3253]
[84] Wasilewski, 2003 [AL3478]
[85] Barnes, Kashdan, 2002 [AL3253]
[86] Wasilewski, 2003 [AL3478]
[87] Weissman and Sugarman, April 1991 [AL0144]