



## Revolt at John Deere — Ties to a Radical Past

Posted on October 16, 2021 by Toni Gilpin

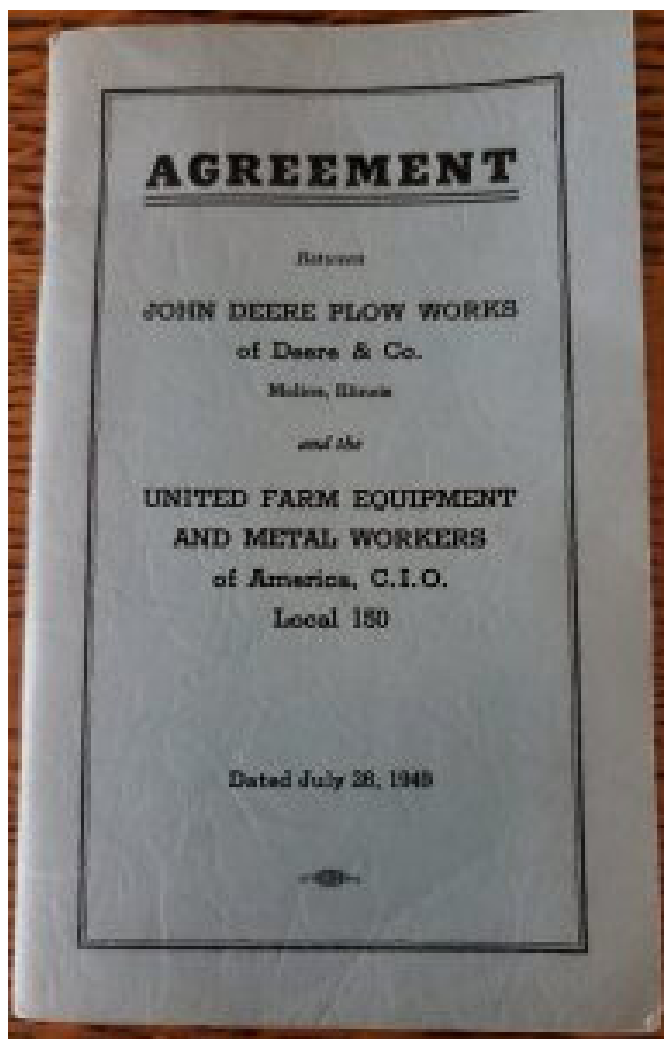
*Below Toni Gilpin tells a pictured story of John Deere workers radical past, a story that connects to the recently launched John Deere strike. The Midwest holds a hidden memory of militancy and radicalism. And not just Chicago and the major cities.*

*Media coverage of the John Deere strike has included claims that workers make \$60,000 and more per year. [Jonah Furman's](#) reporting has disputed that figure, and he explains that long bouts of layoffs every year reduce workers' pay. Moreover, he has brought into focus the fact that many pay for performance (incentive plans) -which are increasingly common- are subject to manipulation by management. These have long been the source of worker anger. Moreover, he noted that incentive pay plans pit departments and workers against each other in order to earn that pay. At Deere, "the top base pay for most workers is about \$20. . . (though) in the fine print they said it's an estimate based on 'CIPP120%.'" CIPP stands for Continuous Improvement Pay Plan, "a 'team based incentive pay," which pays the worker according to department productivity. Workers have quotas set by the company, and every 6 months, management increases the quota by 2%. If workers "hit 115% or more" of their quota, the company puts it into a reserve fund. Some workers realize a reward from CIPP but others don't and they can't really always figure out why. One worker told Furman*

*that workers see it as wage theft. Certainly that's how incentive systems in many factories in the 1920s and 1930s worked. Workers turned in tags and learned that there was some slide rule formula that created their total pay. It was utterly confounding and subject to the sense that theft was operational.*

*Toni Gilpin presented the following thread on twitter, one I thought was worthy of re-posting as a blog. It highlights the way that workers fought incentive plans in the past and how much they contributed to a militant fight for workplace justice. It connects the past to the present strike. -Rosemary Feurer, ed.*

Jonah Furman has highlighted how incentive pay systems can only be overcome by a massive dose of solidarity, the kind that was systematically discouraged in the age of neoliberalism.



1949 Deere Contract. Credit: Toni Gilpin

This '49 contract was between Deere & the Farm Equipment Workers, not the UAW. Until the mid-1950s the FE was the dominant union in the Quad Cities, the center of the US ag-imp industry. The FE was a radical union, connected to the Communist Party, and I tell its story in *The Long Deep Grudge*. That book focuses on International Harvester, long the giant in the industry, but the FE was pivotal to organizing Deere as well.

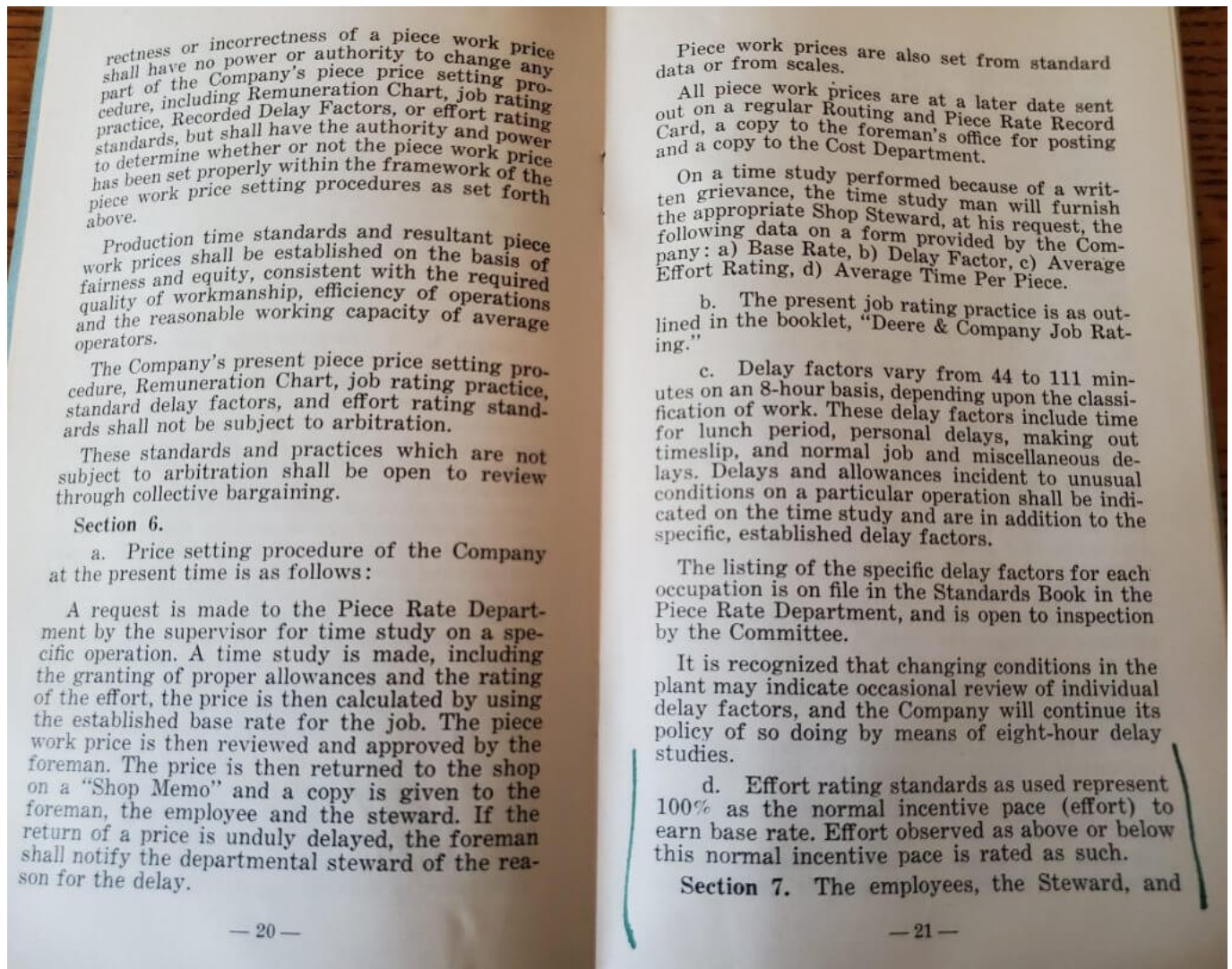
Incentive pay is still the rule at Deere, as Jonah Furman recently tweeted about. These pay systems led to terrific shop floor discontent, because every worker's pay rate was regularly renegotiated, as management re-timed jobs to eke out more production for the same, or less, dollars.



E. Moline Deere workers on strike. Credit: Toni Gilpin



Quad Cities workers were once known for their exceptional militancy; this photo above indicates how FE members in E. Moline, Illinois (one of the Quad Cities) protected their picket lines. Part of this was because unlike auto, agricultural-implement companies like International Harvester and Deere used complicated piecework “incentive” systems, not straight hourly rates, for their production workforces.



Deere 1949 contract. Credit: Toni Gilpin

Much of the Deere 1949 contract (pictured here) is devoted to stipulating workers' rights in what was a purposely opaque system.

Dated July 26, 1949

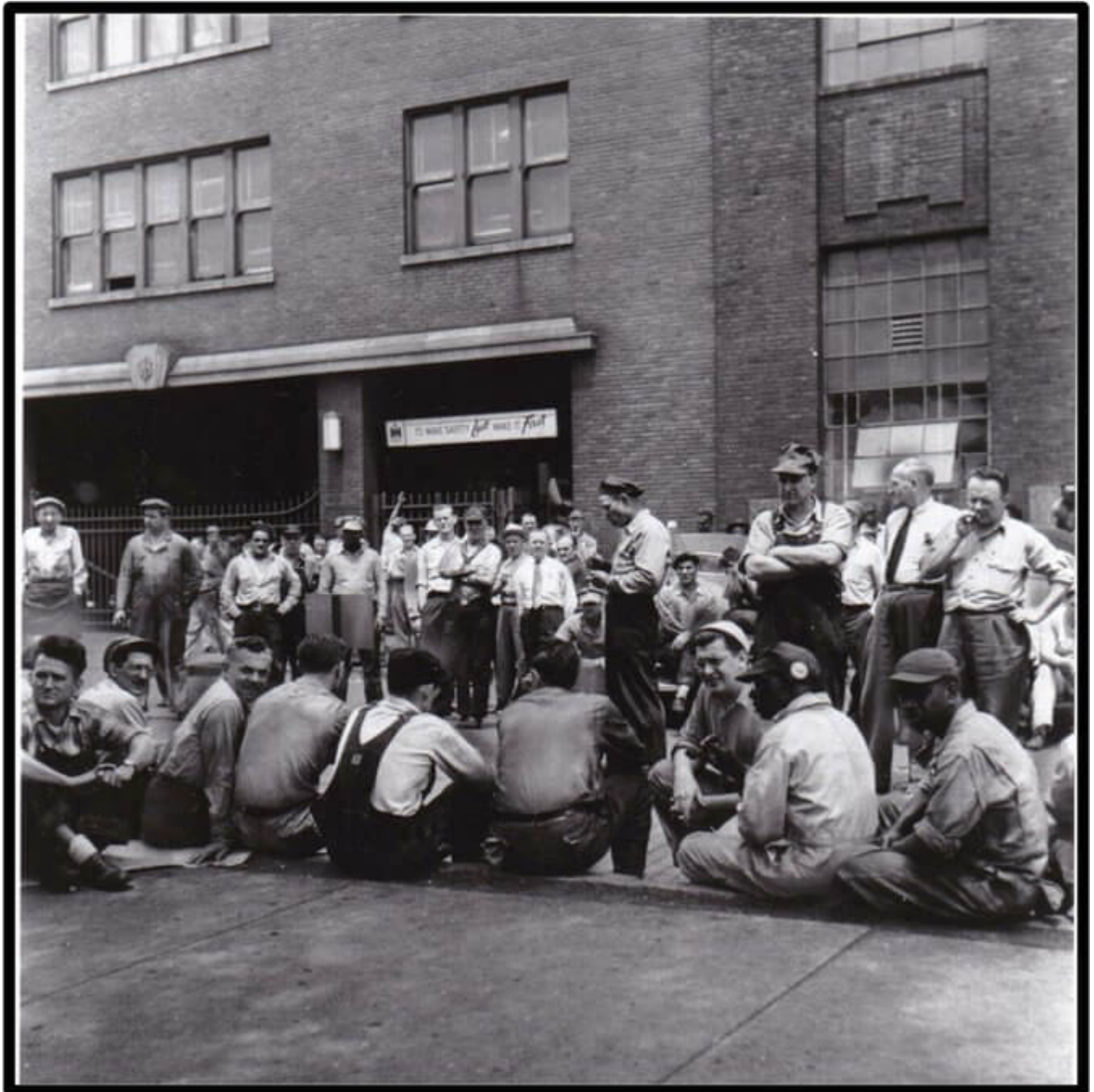
JOHN DEERE FLOW WORKS REMUNERATION CHART AND GRADES										EXHIBIT "B"	
GRADE	DESCRIPTION	GRADE	DESCRIPTION	GRADE	DESCRIPTION	GRADE	DESCRIPTION	GRADE	DESCRIPTION	GRADE	DESCRIPTION
1	100-120	100-120	100-120	100-120	100-120	100-120	100-120	100-120	100-120	100-120	100-120
2	120-140	120-140	120-140	120-140	120-140	120-140	120-140	120-140	120-140	120-140	120-140
3	140-160	140-160	140-160	140-160	140-160	140-160	140-160	140-160	140-160	140-160	140-160
4	160-180	160-180	160-180	160-180	160-180	160-180	160-180	160-180	160-180	160-180	160-180
5	180-200	180-200	180-200	180-200	180-200	180-200	180-200	180-200	180-200	180-200	180-200
6	200-220	200-220	200-220	200-220	200-220	200-220	200-220	200-220	200-220	200-220	200-220
7	220-240	220-240	220-240	220-240	220-240	220-240	220-240	220-240	220-240	220-240	220-240
8	240-260	240-260	240-260	240-260	240-260	240-260	240-260	240-260	240-260	240-260	240-260
9	260-280	260-280	260-280	260-280	260-280	260-280	260-280	260-280	260-280	260-280	260-280
10	280-300	280-300	280-300	280-300	280-300	280-300	280-300	280-300	280-300	280-300	280-300
11	300-320	300-320	300-320	300-320	300-320	300-320	300-320	300-320	300-320	300-320	300-320
12	320-340	320-340	320-340	320-340	320-340	320-340	320-340	320-340	320-340	320-340	320-340
13	340-360	340-360	340-360	340-360	340-360	340-360	340-360	340-360	340-360	340-360	340-360
14	360-380	360-380	360-380	360-380	360-380	360-380	360-380	360-380	360-380	360-380	360-380
15	380-400	380-400	380-400	380-400	380-400	380-400	380-400	380-400	380-400	380-400	380-400
16	400-420	400-420	400-420	400-420	400-420	400-420	400-420	400-420	400-420	400-420	400-420
17	420-440	420-440	420-440	420-440	420-440	420-440	420-440	420-440	420-440	420-440	420-440
18	440-460	440-460	440-460	440-460	440-460	440-460	440-460	440-460	440-460	440-460	440-460
19	460-480	460-480	460-480	460-480	460-480	460-480	460-480	460-480	460-480	460-480	460-480
20	480-500	480-500	480-500	480-500	480-500	480-500	480-500	480-500	480-500	480-500	480-500
21	500-520	500-520	500-520	500-520	500-520	500-520	500-520	500-520	500-520	500-520	500-520
22	520-540	520-540	520-540	520-540	520-540	520-540	520-540	520-540	520-540	520-540	520-540
23	540-560	540-560	540-560	540-560	540-560	540-560	540-560	540-560	540-560	540-560	540-560
24	560-580	560-580	560-580	560-580	560-580	560-580	560-580	560-580	560-580	560-580	560-580
25	580-600	580-600	580-600	580-600	580-600	580-600	580-600	580-600	580-600	580-600	580-600
26	600-620	600-620	600-620	600-620	600-620	600-620	600-620	600-620	600-620	600-620	600-620
27	620-640	620-640	620-640	620-640	620-640	620-640	620-640	620-640	620-640	620-640	620-640
28	640-660	640-660	640-660	640-660	640-660	640-660	640-660	640-660	640-660	640-660	640-660
29	660-680	660-680	660-680	660-680	660-680	660-680	660-680	660-680	660-680	660-680	660-680
30	680-700	680-700	680-700	680-700	680-700	680-700	680-700	680-700	680-700	680-700	680-700
31	700-720	700-720	700-720	700-720	700-720	700-720	700-720	700-720	700-720	700-720	700-720
32	720-740	720-740	720-740	720-740	720-740	720-740	720-740	720-740	720-740	720-740	720-740
33	740-760	740-760	740-760	740-760	740-760	740-760	740-760	740-760	740-760	740-760	740-760
34	760-780	760-780	760-780	760-780	760-780	760-780	760-780	760-780	760-780	760-780	760-780
35	780-800	780-800	780-800	780-800	780-800	780-800	780-800	780-800	780-800	780-800	780-800
36	800-820	800-820	800-820	800-820	800-820	800-820	800-820	800-820	800-820	800-820	800-820
37	820-840	820-840	820-840	820-840	820-840	820-840	820-840	820-840	820-840	820-840	820-840
38	840-860	840-860	840-860	840-860	840-860	840-860	840-860	840-860	840-860	840-860	840-860
39	860-880	860-880	860-880	860-880	860-880	860-880	860-880	860-880	860-880	860-880	860-880
40	880-900	880-900	880-900	880-900	880-900	880-900	880-900	880-900	880-900	880-900	880-900
41	900-920	900-920	900-920	900-920	900-920	900-920	900-920	900-920	900-920	900-920	900-920
42	920-940	920-940	920-940	920-940	920-940	920-940	920-940	920-940	920-940	920-940	920-940
43	940-960	940-960	940-960	940-960	940-960	940-960	940-960	940-960	940-960	940-960	940-960
44	960-980	960-980	960-980	960-980	960-980	960-980	960-980	960-980	960-980	960-980	960-980
45	980-1000	980-1000	980-1000	980-1000	980-1000	980-1000	980-1000	980-1000	980-1000	980-1000	980-1000

When over jobs are compared of comparison as identified (1) the percentage 10% is to be added as for calculating from the specified contribution of the time rate.

This chart, attached to the back of the contract, lists the differing pay rates for various jobs. Credit: Toni Gilpin

On the other hand the UAW's Walter Reuther viewed increased production as a panacea that could benefit all parties, and so endorsed pay increases linking worker pay to higher production output. The Marxist, CP-influenced FE leadership saw these "incentive" schemes as a finely-tuned way of exploiting more surplus value out of the agricultural-implements workforce, and so the FE opposed productivity pay plans, and encouraged work stoppages when workers were getting short-changed or speeded up. The union committed to helping management meet its production goals, which meant no UAW support for walkouts or slowdowns protesting speedup. UAW contracts also had lower representation ratios, with much smaller steward bodies. UAW members enjoyed good wages & benefits but lost shop floor control. Speedup was routine and life on the job increasingly miserable.





FE Walkout. Credit: Toni Gilpin

FE contracts provided at least one steward in each department; those stewards could spend as much time as they wanted handling grievances on the company's dollar. Walkout rates in FE plants were astronomical; 100s in each plant every year. Slowdowns were also a common FE tactic.

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Even though they were both in the CIO, Reuther wanted to absorb all agricultural implement plants into the UAW and worked to get CIO consent to that. FE resisted. Beginning in 1947, anti-communist Reuther started to raid FE plants and by the late 1940s he declared war on the FE, and the Quad Cities became "the scene of the country's largest union war." FE members and UAW organizers literally slugged it out in the streets.

# *why we fight back*



A UAW organizer (left) flees from FE members at the International Harvester Plant in East Moline, Ill.

The reasons why Farm Equipment workers want their own union



FE leaflet. Credit: Toni Gilpin

Despite the UAW's greater resources, workers stayed loyal to the combative FE, but the hostile cold war climate took its toll, and in 1955 the FE merged with the UAW. (Deere Plow, though, went into the IAM instead.)

## Battle of Ballots - - -

# *FE Trounces UAW at Deere Plow*

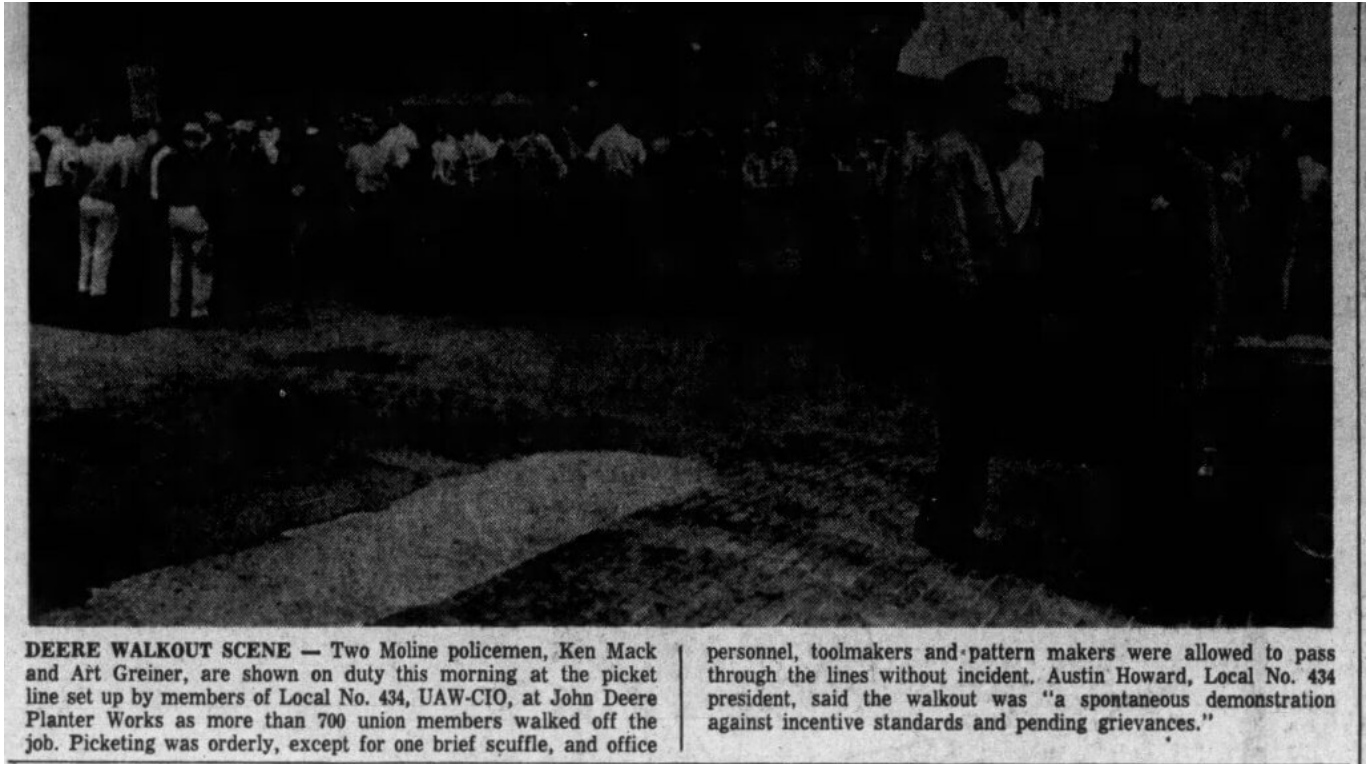


John T. Watkins of Rock Island, district FE president, standing in the rear center, doesn't appear to be too disturbed as he watches one group count votes in yesterday's FE-UAW (both CIO) election at the John Deere Plow works, which FE won by a sizeable majority. Seated at the table, left to right, are Wallace Norfgard, FE, William Lamont, representing the company, and William James, UAW. Standing, at Watkins' right, is Henry Bylo, a UAW checker. Counting the ballots is Allen Haas, an NLRB field examiner, who helped conduct the election. (Dispatch photo)

UAW triumphs at Deere.

But for a long time ag-imp workers in the Quad Cities continued to bedevil both Deere and IH, actively resisting speedup.

This 1961 photo below isn't very clear, but note the caption. This militant legacy is what Deere strikers can draw on. I don't know how many Deere workers today are literal descendants of those FE members from back then, but seeing how they're taking on both the company and the UAW leadership they are in spirit at least.



## Author



• [Toni Gilpin](#)