

LIFE IN THE U.S.

WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT

Wilmar women don't bank on fairness

By Anthony Schmitz

ONE THING LEO PIRSCH HAS learned is that it doesn't help his case to talk about the eight striking women who have picketed his bank for the past nine months. "I don't want to talk about it," Pirsch says, then turns back to work laid out on his large wooden deck in Wilmar, Minn.

Pirsch is president of Citizen's National Bank, the smallest of three banks in Wilmar, a usually quiet town of 13,600 on the central Minnesota prairie. Pirsch's troubles started simply enough: He passed over a number of female employees and hired a male for a management trainee position. Women with up to 20 years of banking experience helped train the new man, then found out later that they were paid \$300 to \$396 less per month.

"We're not all equal."

Pirsch, a bald man with an opulent figure, explained the wage difference in unfortunate terms. "We're not all equal, you know," he told a female employee. Trying to clear matters up later, he said, "Sure, everyone isn't equal. You have the president and the officers up here"—Pirsch held his hand in mid air—"and you have the bank employees down here." His hand sunk toward the floor.

"This isn't a fight over unions," Pirsch concluded. "These girls are being exploited by the National Organization for Women."

Pirsch now finds his bank under seige, the only bank to be struck in Minnesota's history. Eight female employees filed a sex discrimination charge against the bank, formed a union, went on strike and filed unfair labor practices charges with the National Labor Relations Board. These days Pirsch enters the bank in the morning through the back door and leaves at night through the back door.

On the front lawn his striking employees are dug in for a long strike. Picket signs are wound between plastic strips of lawn chairs and an eight track tape player rests underneath a chair with tapes spilling across the grass. Five strikers with tenure at the bank ranging from ten months to ten years lounged outside Citizen's National, hooting "Scab!" and "Kooknossi!" (a) at strikebreakers pulling into the parking lot.

Glennis Anderson had worked at the bank for only a few months before the male management trainee was brought in at \$700 a month. At the minimum wage, she made closer to \$400 a month. The male employee had a college degree, but the difference seemed unwarranted. To striker Irene Wallin, a mother of three with 20 years of banking experience, the wage seemed plainly discriminatory. Her monthly salary is \$975. "And I had to help train him," she said from her lawn chair outside the bank.

With nine other female employees, they filed a sex discrimination claim that started with the Minnesota Human Rights Commission and finally came to a bureaucratic rest with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in Chicago. They say that a policy of harassment was begun against them at the bank shortly afterward.

Management began leaning on women who filed the charge, causing two of them to ask that their names be removed from the complaint. "We were criticized," Anderson said. "Whatever we did was always wrong." Women who filed the complaint were assigned to the drive-in windows more frequently—an unpopular task—and often had their hours changed.

By May of last year the women voted in



Three of the eight women strikers picket in front of the Citizens Bank in Wilmar, Minnesota. They have been on strike for nine months.

In the winter the women picketed wearing snowmobile suits, scarves up to their eyes, and heavy boots.

a union called the Willmar Bank Employees Association, an unaffiliated local. They started contract negotiations with the bank, demanding a union shop. Contract negotiations stalled last December, and by Dec. 16 the eight union members were out on the street picketing.

Minnesota winters.

Minnesota, they discovered, is an unpleasant location for a long strike. The wind rips across the fields and the temperature is usually a depressing conversation topic. The women picketed the bank in shifts from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. daily, wearing snowmobile suits, scarves wound up to their eyes and heavy boots.

About \$30,000 in donations fueled the strike over the past nine months, with

large contributions coming from the AFL-CIO and the Minnesota Education Association. Strike headquarters in the basement of the Willmar Labor Home is wall-papered with letters from supporters around the country who made small donations.

The bank, meanwhile, has had less luck gathering support. Bankers in a northern county said in May that they received letters from Pirsch at Citizens National asking for contributions to help pay the bank's legal expenses. Ruth Danielson, president of the Atwater State Bank, answered that she wouldn't send a contribution and added that she thought the strike and delays in reaching a settlement gave banking "a bad name."

"Publicly, the other banks can't sup-

port us," said a Citizens National director who refused to be identified. "They won't touch us with a ten-foot pole—publicly. They have given us hidden moral support. It's not public. It's hidden." But customers themselves are less obtuse about their stand. Bank officials admitted early in the strike that \$600,000 had been withdrawn by customers since the strike began.

Still, Wilmar is not a strong labor town. Railroad workers are organized, as are telephone and state hospital workers and highway crews. But at Jennie-O Turkey Farms nearby, 800 employees voted out the union by a two-to-one margin last fall. Most other workers in the city, according to striker Sylvia Erickson, work for the minimum wage.

"Preventative medicine."

Wilmar businessmen have remained generally inscrutable during the strike. Chamber of Commerce manager Roger Nygaard hazarded only the most cautious of guesses and said he thought the business community supported the bank. John Mack, an attorney who handled legal work for the strikers, claims he had less subtle dealing with businessmen. Mack was chairman of the county Independent Republicans. He quit early this summer after businessmen told him that donations would be scarce in the fall campaigns if he continued to defend the bank union.

Other bank employees in Wilmar have shown little interest in organizing, waiting instead to see what happens to the strikers at Citizens National. "The other banks are watching to see if we go down the drain," striker Andresen said. "Their management is applying a lot of preventative medicine now," raising pay and juggling hours to keep employees contented. None of them wants to have the first union bank in Minnesota," she said. (Only one other bank in the state is unionized, and that bank is owned by a union.)

Whether or not the strike succeeds may be settled soon, when federal judge Elbert Gadsden makes a decision on an unfair labor practices suit between the bank and the union. The bank is charged with failure to bargain in good faith, threatening to replace union members with other workers and excluding strikers from a company picnic. If the women win the NLRB case, the bank will be forced to hire them back or make an appeal. An appeal means more delay, and Erickson said last week that "the bank knows that stalling is their best weapon. They've stalled all this time hoping we'd go away. We won't." Losing the case means an end to the strike but no jobs.

The bank already lost one round in court when the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission decided that the bank owed \$11,700 in back wages to strikers and other female employees.

Pirsch, a harried traditionalist, observed early on that his striking employees were "attacking all banks by attacking us." The outcome will certainly be watched closely by bankers across the country who, according to the American Bankers Association, only rarely are forced to contend with unionized employees. The strike is one of the few ever called against a bank because only a handful of banks are organized.

In the Labor Home basement last week, Erickson looked forward to renewed contract negotiations if the NLRB case is settled favorably. "But the banking industry," she observed plainly, "doesn't want to see us succeed."

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By Dan Rosen

NEW YORK

TO THE BASEBALL PURIST, THE script was perfect. The New York Yankees, last year's champions given up for dead, were coming into Fenway Park for a four-game series trailing their old rivals, the Boston Red Sox, by four games. The lengthening shadows, the hint of fall in the air underscored the importance of the series. This was September, when baseball games change from mid-summer respite to the classic contexts of skill and grace that thrill every fan. In Boston and New York, people changed weekend plans to be near a TV for the epic struggle.

The result was a farce. The Yankees swept four games from the hapless Bosox, battering them for an incredible 42 runs and 67 hits. The Sox committed 11 errors while watching the Yankees eat up their pitching for an awesome .395 average.

In Boston, they called it another massacre. The Yankees, 14 games out in mid-July, departed Boston tied for first place, leaving the Red Sox to reap abuse from their notoriously fickle fans and press. And in New York, the smug and faithful alike felt fortune had smiled on the virtuous.

As the dust began to settle, one thing was clear. The Yankees had seized the momentum from the Red Sox, who earlier in the season had seemed invincible. In the week following this calamity, the Yankees moved into a 1½-game lead.

A return series the following weekend (Sept. 15-17) at Yankee Stadium offered little hope to Bosox fans as the Yankees took two games and sent Boston packing, 2½ games off the lead.

The decisive blow, though, was struck in the first September meeting between the two rivals. On a cool Thursday night (Sept. 7) in Fenway Park—the Yankees routed the Red Sox 15-3, pounding out 21 hits. Ex-Yankee Mike Torrez, who before the game talked of liking “pressure situations,” was kayoed in the second inning. The Red Sox cause was not helped by two throwing errors by third-baseman Butch Hobson, whose injured elbow created a gaping hole in the Sox defense. More ominous for Boston's cause was the multitude of Yankee hits.

For this observer, the Red Sox perfor-

mance brought back memories of the 1964 Phillies, who managed to blow a six-game lead with ten games to play. The Big Apple came to town and the Red Sox simply choked on it.

Injuries hamper Sox.

There are some extenuating circumstances that might explain the Sox' futility. The club has been hit with injuries. Second baseman Jerry Remy was out of the lineup. Third-baseman Butch Hobson played with bone chips in his elbow. His two errors both resulted in runs. Catcher Carlton Fisk, one of the best in the game, played with a broken rib. His three throwing errors also resulted in runs. And Dwight Evans, whom many consider the finest outfielder in baseball, played dizzy after being beamed recently. The usually peerless Evans dropped one fly ball and threw another ball away before removing himself from the lineup.

The Yankee menagerie.

The Red Sox began to take on the Yankees' penchant for internal dissent. Shortstop Rick Burleson criticized Evans for removing himself from the lineup: “We have a guy who pulls himself out of a game after making two errors. They had a guy (Reggie Jackson) come out of the hospital to play in this series. That's how much it meant to them.”

For Yankee fans the reversal of fortune

was sublime. Before the season the World Champions were considered a shoo-in for another title. The best team in baseball had strengthened itself in the off-season with the addition of starter Andy Messersmith and ace reliever Rich Gossage. But then injuries wrecked what looked like the finest pitching staff in baseball. Messersmith was cut down in spring training, and Don Gullet developed a sore arm. Catfish Hunter, suffering from arm trouble, proved ineffective. Early in the season the Yankees were struggling and the tension between slugger Reggie Jackson and manager Billy Martin began to tear the team apart. By mid-July, after losing a crucial series to the Red Sox, the Yanks were a hopeless 14 games off the pace and fading.

Then the tension between Martin and Jackson exploded. Jackson, fed up with Martin's gibes and rumor-mongering, willfully disobeyed a sign to hit away and bunted for a third strike. Martin suspended Jackson. But when Jackson returned from the suspension impenitent, Martin, whose drinking problem was no secret, was enraged. He told reporters that Jackson and owner George Steinbrenner, who had signed Jackson over Martin's objections, deserved each other. “They're both liars,” said Martin. “One's a born liar, the other convicted,” alluding to Steinbrenner's felony conviction for illegal contributions to the Nixon campaign in

1972.

This was too much for Steinbrenner, who last year had gotten the fiery manager to agree to a set of rules that included no public criticism. Martin was replaced by Bob Lemon, a low-key, experienced baseball man. But then Steinbrenner added to the confusion by dramatically announcing on Old-Timers Day that Martin had been rehired for the 1980 season.

No one's figured that one out yet. In July it only added to the image of the Bronx Bombers now transformed into what the press referred to as the Bronx Zoo. The bickering between players, especially the super-sensitive Jackson and the prickly catcher Thurman Munson, encouraged most fans to give up the season for lost.

Time running out.

But under Lemon the Yankees began to play solid baseball. The return of Hunter to the starting rotation, his sore arm cured by the latest orthopedic miracle, helped. So did the first Red Sox slump of the season that reduced the lead to the vicinity of eight games. Under Lemon the Yankees have played 34-13, .730 baseball while the Red Sox have been limping along near the .500.

When the Red Sox arrived in New York the following Friday (Sept. 15) following the “massacre,” they showed few signs of revival. In the first game Guidry victimized them again with another two hit shut-out. The Yanks took the second game 3-2, winning in the ninth inning on a Mickey Rivers triple and Thurman Munson's sacrifice fly. Finally on Sunday (Sept. 17) the Red Sox broke the jinx, winning 7-3.

The Red Sox left New York 2½ games behind the Yankees with time running out. The loss of center fielder Fred Lynn with a sprained ankle will not aid Boston's cause. Of course, “anything can happen,” but as of this writing the Yankees appear to have the edge. If they do win, they will have achieved one of the most remarkable comebacks in baseball history. Only the 1914 Boston Braves, who charged from last place on July 4 to a pennant, will have accomplished a longer journey than the Yankees.

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SPORTS

Boston Red Sox eat Yankee dust

“We (the Sox) have a guy who pulls himself out of the game after making two errors. They had a guy come out of the hospital to play. That's how much it meant to the Yankees.”

FANS



PHOTOGRAPH BY MEG GERKEN