

On Strike in the City

by Gerry Schramm

The first day of the Steamfitters and Pipewranglers Local 175 strike was exhilarating. Every man (accurate; there were no women in the union) showed his support outside the Willgarden High Rise Corporation's company headquarters on Fifth Avenue, shaking unreadable signs packed with every grievance, walking slow miles in a large oval, joining in the lame attempts at catchy chants (an example: "Steamfitters, pipewranglers, that we be, our 401k needs more of a match than percentage point three"). Morale was high.

By week four, however, attendance had shrunk to a miserable few who hadn't informed their spouses that they were striking and still needed to get out of the house for a few hours each day. Union boss Johnny Friense knew just the thing to inject some life into the flagging strikers.

"What we need is a giant inflatable rat," he said. "That'll get this party started."

So Johnny called up a rental company that specialized in inflatable fauna and ordered a giant rat for the following Monday's strike line. He called each member of Local 175 and told them he had a big surprise in store for Monday and that they had better show up.

On Monday, Johnny arrived at the Willgarden headquarters early. At eight thirty a van arrived. "You order an inflatable?" the driver said to Johnny.

"Sure did," Johnny said, barely able to hide his excitement.

"Where you want it?"

Johnny pointed to the perfect spot, visible from both the building's

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lobby and the street. Anyone going into or out of the Willgarden building would see the giant rat and realize its significance.

"It'll take a while. It's big," the driver said. "Why don't you come back in half an hour? So, you know, you'll be surprised the first time you see it. Bosses, they always like to be surprised."

Johnny thought that was a great idea. Two cups of coffee later, Johnny turned the corner and found all the men gathered around the inflatable, laughing.

It wasn't a rat. It was a gigantic squirrel. And it was eating an acorn. And, judging from its long eyelashes, it was female.

Johnny, his face a red cherry, broke through the guffawing crowd. "What the fuck is that?" he demanded.

"It's your inflatable," the driver said.

"No it's not!" Johnny screamed. "I ordered a rat! We're on strike here and we need a rat!"

The driver flipped some pages on his clipboard. "Says here you ordered a squirrel. So that's what you got. A squirrel."

"We can't use a squirrel, especially not a female squirrel eating a nut. We need a rat. Everyone knows that Willgarden is a rat. What does a squirrel mean?"

"Could be worse," a striker yelled, "it could be a male eating his own nuts."

Johnny ignored the comment. "Really," he said to the driver, "what characteristics does a squirrel possess that makes it a good simile for management?"

"First of all," the driver said, "it's metaphor, not simile."

"Listen, I didn't ask you for a grammar lesson."

"It's not grammar, either. It's a figure of speech. But I can see your point."

"Who gives a shit what it is?" Johnny said.

"Rhetorical," the driver said, "so I'm not going to answer."

Johnny closed his eyes and breathed deeply. "Okay, okay. Listen. I want a rat, not a squirrel."

The driver moved his gum from one side of his mouth to the other as he consulted his clipboard again. "No can do," he said. "The last rat went out a week ago to a trucking firm in North Jersey. Something about a court case. I don't really know the specifics, but if they're ordering a rat you know it can't be good."

"That's why I ordered a rat," Johnny said. "A rat means that it can't be good. You know what a female squirrel says? A female squirrel says that all I have to do is bat my long eyelashes and someone will bring me some nuts. I gotta have something else."

"Something else, something else." The driver flipped more pages. "Let's see, let's see. Well, I got a gorilla that you can have tomorrow morning."

Johnny thought. "Is it holding a banana?"

"It is."

"Then I don't want it."

“Why not? It's really big and...”

“I've got my reasons!”

“All right, all right. How about this. A stork.”

Johnny shook his head.

“Yeah, a stork's no good. Let's see. How about this: a mongoose. Those fuckers'll tear your heart out given half a chance.”

“No mongoose.”

“Okay,” the driver said. “Here it is, here it is, I got it. How about a snake? I can get it here today. This afternoon. It's a cobra standing straight up with those neck things opened up and huge fangs like it's ready to attack. Pretty scary for an inflatable.”

The guys around Johnny mumbled their consent. Johnny took his cue from them. “Yeah, a snake. Management's a snake.” He turned to the striking crowd. “Management's a no-good dirty snake!”

A cheer erupted.

“Great,” the driver said. “I'll be back later. Until then, keep the squirrel.” Before Johnny could protest, the driver was behind the wheel and down the street.

Johnny raised a fist in the air. “Management's a dirty snake!”

The crowd cheered again and drifted away from the squirrel.

