

DOC IN ACTION: I DON'T GIVE A DAMN ABOUT PUBLIC OPINION

Doc Lawler – Hero or villain? This question was most volatile in 1963, when Doc was negotiating with the Mechanical Contractors Association (MCA) for a new labor contract for his Steamfitters. The two sides were clearly defined. On the MCA's management side stood Civic Progress, CEOs, developers, the progressive politicians, the *Globe-Democrat*, Republicans, and other conservatives. On the Steamfitters' labor side stood Doc Lawler, much of the Democratic party, machine/patronage politicians, and those who were poor.

The first work stoppage came in April, when 700 members of Local 562 walked off their jobs. Doc knew it would be a tough negotiating year since the Steamfitters' three year contract with the Mechanical Contractors Association (MCA) would expire on June 15. In a preemptive move, Lawler met with the MCA in April and asked for the immediate implementation of a "union dues check-off system." When MCA management told him that this demand should wait until the June renegotiations, Doc was quoted as saying, "The association men won't show up to work tomorrow."ⁱ What Doc said exactly is always difficult to find out because he never talked to the press. Unlike many others in his position, he wasn't interested in small talk with the press or with maintaining any sort of media image. At a different set of negotiations later in the summer, he would be quoted as saying, "I don't give a damn about the public and public opinion. The only thing I give a damn about is my family, my conscience, and my pipefitters."ⁱⁱ In the summer, Doc certainly didn't make improving public opinion of the Steamfitters his first priority.

When the Steamfitters' contract ran out with the MCA on June 15, no new agreement had been reached. For about 800 fitters, that meant that on June 17, it was time to strike against the MCA. Later in the summer, on July 1, the fitters were joined by Plumbers Local 35, Lathers Local 3, and Plasters Local 3. Even though none of the unions were actually picketing construction sites, there were a total of 2,000 workers and its effect could be felt by many in St. Louis. Doc Lawler was at the center of it all. His union was the first to go on strike, his union had the most people on strike, and it was believed by many of the contractors that his hand controlled each of the separate union negotiations. When negotiations between the Plumbing Contractors Association (PCA) and Local 35 fell through, for example, PCA attorney J. Glennon McKenna said the "contractors are convinced that they cannot sign a new agreement with Local 35 unless it first receives Lawler's approval." The head of Local 35, Lawrence Knoll, refuted the claim, saying that "Doc Lawler is not calling the shots for the plumbers. We are two separate and distinct locals." Suspicions were raised because both the plumbers and the Steamfitters belonged to the same parent union, the American Federated Labor (AFL). The contractors saw that the AFL could merge the two locals at any time. Combining the pipe trade unions would "increase the power of the controversial Lawler," and labor observers believed "Lawler would emerge as the dominant leader of the combined crafts." Why was the management side so afraid of Doc gaining additional power? The answer lies in Doc's negotiation strategies.

Doc went into negotiations knowing what he wanted and not settling for much less. In his only newspaper interview on the subject, Doc was asked to comment on the assertion that he had "gained a reputation as a rough and tough negotiator." Doc responded that

“negotiations are my responsibility. I support my men and I realize how far I can go with contractors. If they can convince me that I’m going to an extreme, I’m willing to back up. But they’ve got to convince me first. In regard to that ‘rough and tough,’ in the 20 years that I’ve been negotiating I know of no contractor who has gone out of business.” In the summer of 1963, Doc showed no signs of backing up from his demands for a reduction in the work week from 40 to 32 hours, and a \$1 increase in fringe benefits (for welfare and pension benefits.) Upon receiving those demands in February, the MCA said that the fitters “want the world with a fence around it” and that the contractors didn’t “anticipate [Local 562 would] get anything like what they are asking.” With both sides entrenched firmly, the strike showed no signs of stopping in July. Doc, familiar with such stand-offs, was not inclined to budge. But just before the Fourth of July, he had to make a very difficult decision.

Summers in St. Louis are characterized by strong heat and humidity. At the beginning of July, St. Louis was experiencing a heat wave with ninety degree-plus days. At St. Joseph’s Hospital in Kirkwood (just west of St. Louis city,) 150 patients had only wall fans to keep them cool. The hospital had recently sold its window air conditioning units because it had invested in new central air conditioning. The problem on July 3rd was this: the air conditioning system didn’t work yet because the Steamfitters were refusing to add the final touches and turn it on. The contractor who installed the unit, Phil Miller, tried to get Doc to let two of his men turn the system, but Doc would only agree to it if Miller would accept the Steamfitters’ terms in its strike against the MCA. Since Miller was a member of the MCA, that wasn’t something he wanted to do. The situation worsened with each day. Sister Margaret Alacoque, administrator of St. Joseph’s, bemoaned the

fact that they had “\$300,000 tied up in [the] new system, without any benefit. The patients as well as the staff are suffering.” The hospital chaplain, Fr. Harry Roberts, finally called Doc and pleaded their case. Doc agreed to send a man out, but in a calculated move, the man he sent was only a service man, not experienced enough to work with a system the size of St. Joseph’s. When the strike started in June, a Steamfitter inspection committee had traveled to St. Joseph’s and determined that it was not an emergency situation. Still, even if hadn’t been classified as an emergency, the St. Joseph’s situation was certainly a major concern for Doc.

Doc felt torn between the two sides. To allow for the air conditioning to be turned on would be bending in favor of the contractor management, but on the other hand, leaving the air off meant that 150 patients and half the hospital staff would be miserably hot and possibly even made more sick. Doc was targeted by the most biting comments he would ever receive from the *Globe-Democrat* editorial page. On July 4, 1963 they asked, “Are Steamfitters People?” and concluded that if they are, “they’ll never really convince very many of it until they throw the present rotten leadership of their union out, and put respectable and responsible men in their place.”ⁱⁱⁱ On that same day, Doc reached his decision and agreed to “send sufficient men, including the general foreman who was in charge of the installation, free of charge, to put the unit into operation.” Doc’s requirement was that Phil Miller sign a release “that the men, other than the foreman, will not be employees of Mr. Miller’s company.” In a few days, the air conditioning unit was cooling the hospital. Talks between the MCA and the Steamfitters, however, were not yet up and running.

It would have been hard not to be on one side or the other in the fight between Doc Lawler and the MCA. The scant middle ground made negotiations very difficult. The MCA felt that collective bargaining with Doc was nothing more than “a series of ultimatums.” Doc felt that the contractors, as well as the U.S. Department of Labor and the press, were all out to keep his Steamfitters from getting what they wanted. The stakes were extremely high because, after a period of slow development, St. Louis was in the midst of a construction boom. It was felt that “for the first time in recent history, that St. Louis [might] be rousing itself from its long-time lethargy and becoming a truly progressive, modern city”^{iv} Indeed, anyone traveling through downtown St. Louis would have seen a number of new construction sites, including those of the 55,000 seat Busch Stadium (finished in 1966) and the St. Louis Arch (completed in 1965). In the seven weeks the Steamfitters had been striking (since June 17th), they and the other striking unions had tied up over \$77,000,000 in construction. For those on the progressive side, and for many St. Louis citizens, Steamfitter demands for wages higher than other comparable industries, and for reduced work weeks, were outrageous. Other unions, including sheetmetal workers, ironworkers, and carpenters had settled contracts, and it made the Steamfitters seem even more as “a pariah among the more respectable union crafts.” Contractors and those interested in the economic growth of St. Louis grew increasingly angry with Lawler and charged that he was “utterly unconcerned that he may be killing millions of dollars of new projects and thousands of jobs inside and beyond his own union by his unreasonable strike.”^v A question surely being asked by many concerned observers was simply, “What could Doc Lawler possibly be thinking?”

What *was* Doc Lawler thinking? Contrary to what his opponents on the other side of the table may have imagined at the time, Doc didn't like being on strike any more than the contractors did. In a letter written three years later, during a time of peaceful labor relations, Doc wrote that he was "happy to report there will be no strike this time. We have got our new contract signed and sealed. Thank God for that."^{vi} But even if Doc didn't like striking, he was more than willing to let it happen. In February of 1963, Local 562 had begun making strike plans by converting "the bulk of its assets from government securities to cash and [by placing] an assessment on Steamfitters for each day they worked." The goal was to have a large hand of cash on hand in order to survive a potentially long-lasting strike. But why was Doc willing to strike for such an extended period of time? To answer this question, we have to consider Doc's relationship to Steamfitter Local 562. At the center of the equation was Doc's belief that putting his Steamfitters to work and getting them the highest possible wages was his chief responsibility as business manager of the union. Detractors argued that this approach smacked of, "I'll take mine and the Devil take the hindmost," but to Doc, selfishness was not the issue. Instead, he felt protection of interests were in danger of being forgotten. For Doc, the massive "civic progress" being made in the city of St. Louis represented the interests not of the working man, but of the business (management) elite. Doc's Steamfitters were constructing buildings in which they could not afford to live, and were helping to create wealth that they would never own.

There were also underlying class issues. The Steamfitters had a reputation for being more rough than some of the other unions. With Larry Callanan's criminal record, and an assortment of other violence-related incidents, there was sometimes an "odor of fear"

surrounding the fitters. They spoke in a style many people thought was rough. Compared to those in management, and those who were leading St. Louis' progressive push, the fitters couldn't write as well, couldn't speak as well, and were not as well polished around the edges. When Doc sat across from the MCA negotiators, he too was outmatched in some ways. Doc had less formal education and though he was street-smart, he was not a scholar. Though he wrote many letters to his daughter Bridget, they were generally short. In one letter, he acknowledged his difficulty with grammar, and told Bridget he would let his wife write about "all the news because I'm not too good at that. It would take all evening for mom to spell the words for me."^{vii}

Given the class differences, the rift between Doc and the contractors was probably both professional and personal. Doc's loyalty was both professionally to the union and personally to others in the working class like himself. When he sat down at the negotiation table, Doc's goal was not to achieve personal glory or look good for the public. He never tried to defend his public image; a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reporter noted that "Lawler will not talk with reporters in person or on the telephone." Doc was not in the business of public relations. His job was to represent his "brothers" in Local 562, and anything less than that was selling out. Doc felt a great kinship with the Steamfitters, and later wrote that "the main thing [is] to keep all of [the] brothers working and we have been doing that so you can see the Good Lord is helping us." When we understand that Local 562 was like a second family for Doc, we can understand why he wouldn't have cared about stopping millions of dollars of construction projects. Loyalty to family was more important to Doc than any sum of money, and Doc's stubborn loyalty would not allow him to see any other alternatives. In this case and others, one might say

Doc was loyal to a fault. But he wouldn't have seen it that way. In Doc's world, the welfare of his family, friends and pipefitters was all that mattered. When Doc laid out his proposal and told contractors, "Take it or leave it," he left no room for compromise because for Doc there was none: you were either loyal to your union or you weren't.

Doc's hard-ball negotiating tactics drew the strike out until the night of Friday August 23, when it was announced that the MCA and the Steamfitters had agreed to a new contract. When members of Local 562 gathered the following Tuesday to ratify the agreement, they liked what they saw. Doc Lawler had successfully arranged for a "1.27½ an hour increase in wages and fringe benefits over a new three-year contract period."^{viii} In addition, he had bargained for a re-structuring of the pension fund management board which favored the union's interests. Were the 68 days of striking, and the loss of \$50,000,000 in St. Louis area construction worth it? For those who answered No, Doc was a villain. But those who answered Yes were the ones Doc cared most about. Perhaps he looked like a villain to much of the public, but the public was not the group Doc answered to. We don't know for sure if Doc was quoted accurately, but it's easy to believe that Doc did indeed quip, "I don't give a damn about the public and public opinion. The only thing I give a damn about is my family, my conscience, and my pipefitters."

ⁱ *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 4/10/63. "Steamfitters Strike for Dues Checkoff."

ⁱⁱ *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 8/4/63. "Contractor Group Quotes Lawler as Saying That Public Opinion Does Not Concern Him."

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 7/4/63. "Are Steamfitters People?"

^{iv} *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 8/2/63. "The Goose and the Golden Egg"

^v *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 8/22/63. "Can St. Louis Afford Steamfitters?"

^{vi} Doc Lawler letter to Bridget, 4/6/66.

^{vii} Doc Lawler letter to Bridget, 4/6/66.

^{viii} *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*. 8/24/63. "Steamfitters, Contractors Agree On Wages."