



Dow Worker/Stakeholder Initiative

Dow's Union Workers—The Forgotten Stakeholders

A publication of the Metal Trades Department, AFL-CIO

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News of Dow Chemical's whopping losses for 2002 came as little surprise to the company's union-represented workers. The grim news included \$338 million in losses resulting from declining sales and increased supply costs, along with more than \$1 billion in liabilities related to the company's legal exposure in two major product liability court proceedings—*asbestos* and *silicone breast implants*—as well as unspecified costs associated with the acquisition of *Union Carbide* (apparently, the merger cost more than twice as much as Dow had estimated).

The individuals who are ultimately responsible for creating the company's financial problems work in the executive suites and the board room, but it will be the company's rank and file workers who pay the price for those problems—in the currency of lost jobs, future economic insecurity and reduced incomes. Along with stockholders, Dow's worker/stakeholders will feel the pinch of the company's economic realities and the necessity to (in the words of Dow Chairman William Stavropoulos "keep as much money inside the company as we can."

While company profits swirled around the drain last year, top level company officials were preoccupied with plans for destroying union representation for employees in Texas City and Freeport, Texas. Dow spent considerable resources—time and money—in frustrating the collective bargaining process for 425 union workers at Texas City. And, as Operating Engineers Business Manager Charles Singletary points out, the company is apparently willing to squander

even more to export its anti-worker policies in order to destroy the unions representing more than 1,100 workers at Freeport.

Singletary reported recently that the unions suggested an extension of the current contract (due to expire in May of 2003) for one year. "This would allow Texas Operations to contribute to the cost cutting measures" by postponing its costly hiring plan initiative (offering generous severance to long-term, trained and experienced craft workers to replace them with contractors), Singletary pointed out, adding: "Desruction of representation for Freeport's workers has no short-term return for Dow."

Yet, Texas Operations has started a program to train salaried employees to run the plants during a work stoppage. Extending the contract would give Dow the time to focus on critical in the near-term cost controls as called for in the CEO's austerity plan. The Union's offer also included an unprecedented "no wage increase for one year" clause, strictly in line with the CEO's cost cutting plan. Freeport management flatly refused the offer.

The history of union-busting by Dow Chemical Company goes back almost half a century when workers at Dow plants around the nation were represented by an assortment of unions including the Metal Trades Department, Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers, International Chemical Workers Union, United Steelworkers, United Mine Workers, Teamsters, various craft unions and independent company-oriented unions.¹

Labor relations were markedly paternalistic and condescending in keeping with the Dow family domination of company management through the 1950s. The tradition established by Herbert Dow in the company's earliest days was to expect employees to be loyal and totally dedicated to the welfare of the company. In return, the company encouraged them to buy stock to tighten the connection between the worker and Dow.²

In the 1960s and early 70s, Dow officials reacted strongly to a series of strikes and began to develop a company-wide policy to combat union activity through an opportunistic "divide and conquer" system that has evolved into what the company today refers to as its "Basic Principles of Salaried Operations."³

The company "discovered" the effectiveness of its "Salaried Operations" sometime in the late 1950s when it opened up a major operation in Plaquemines, Louisiana and went on line using untrained and unskilled local workers in order to avoid hiring union help. According to Dow, this was the first ever operation of its size to operate without skilled labor.

This separation between Dow's salaried and occupational workers creates an unnecessary friction and competition which inevitably swings back and forth depending upon economic conditions.

Since 1993, Dow has been caught in a cost-cutting cycle to maintain profitability while raw material and operating costs were rising and product prices were static. More recently, the company has experienced substantial losses and despite its new stature as the largest chemical company in the world, Dow now claims it must impose a new round of cuts—4,000 jobs and liquidation of some \$1.5 billion in assets.

Dow's current Chairman William Stavropoulos recently announced that among the austerity measures to be adopted in response to its losses was a freeze on all bonuses and awards—so much for "merit" pay.

By the mid-1970s, as the labor movement began to press for sweeping reform of the nation's labor laws, Dow had become a prime example of the worst excesses of corporate anti-union behavior. At hearings before a congressional subcommittee investigating union-busting, panels of Dow's union-represented workers chronicled examples of the company's brash, unapologetic campaign to rid itself of unions.

Union leaders described a series of decertification campaigns that resulted in the loss of 15 units in a period of six years.⁵ The witnesses offered evidence in the form of presentations, case histories and speeches at a company labor

relations conference where top managers and other speakers gave plant managers marching orders on how to deal with "malcontents" and instructions to pick apart union contracts to precipitate hundreds of grievances, eating away at union resources.⁶

At that conference, Earl B. Barnes, then the company's top personnel manager, warned his underlings that Dow headquarters would view union election wins as "failures" by local managers and would take appropriate action to see that such failures would not be repeated.⁷

Can a "Global" Corporation Be a Good Corporate Citizen?

Before globalization had come into the language of business, Dow's top managers were boasting that they were intent on building a worldwide company which would not be answerable to petty government bureaucrats; above and beyond laws, including those that constrain how a company treats its workforce.⁸

Dow was ambivalent about its responsibilities as a corporate citizen long before globalization. Although the company boasts that its role in developing and producing chemical weapons since World War I has been without regard to profits and inspired out of a sense of patriotism, Dow's general behavior both toward the United States and the many communities in which it operates reflects an arrogant attitude that can actually endanger the wellbeing of U.S. communities.

The most obvious example is the company's willingness to pull up stakes and abandon locations where upper-level managers believe local conditions might compromise the company's centralized control. Hence, Dow continues to keep Texas communities guessing about the future operations of Texas City and Freeport as it plans to build a new unit in Seadrift. Or, the company's continued efforts to reduce or escape altogether its tax liabilities in those communities.

In some communities, Dow has only recently been called to task for years of environmental damage—including Plaquemines, Louisiana where the company has apparently been dumping vinyl chloride for years⁹ and in the company's own backyard in Midland, Michigan.

In November, 2001, a chemical spill in Dow's Texas City marine facility sent 15 citizens to the hospital, but the company suffered very little adverse publicity. At about the same time, just weeks after 911, the company was threatening to pull out of the community's safety program because it was miffed with the political leadership of Texas City.

The company has made no apologies for its insistence on cost-cutting by hiring contractors from outside the

Metal Trades Department, AFL-CIO

Galveston-Brazoria County areas in order to save some \$3 to \$7 million in wages—wages lost to the local economy.

Other recent incidents highlight different dimensions of the company's crass disregard for workers and citizens. Dow is one of dozens of Fortune 500 companies routinely purchasing so-called "dead peasant" insurance on its workers. In another case, Dow won a Texas Supreme Court decision that found the company has no legal duty to assure the job safety of an independent contractor.

Dow apparently has little reason to worry about consequences of violating labor law, or even such transgressions as contempt of court. On August 11, 1975, company official Roger Kessler wrote from Freeport, Texas to all Dow major managers describing Dow's "Record Retention" policy. In that letter, Kessler instructed managers to "remove and destroy plant production records."

"The reason for this effort is there is a large lawsuit pending against Dow and we are under court order to produce a wide variety of records which will be used against us. Once the court order is in effect, it is too late to destroy the records and to do so would subject Dow and the individuals carrying out such destruction to contempt of court charges," Kessler wrote.⁹

Dow also pioneered the tactic of setting up ex-employees in contracting businesses to provide an alternative workforce, often paying considerably more to get tasks completed, but creating doubt and uncertainty among its own personnel about their future job security.¹⁰

In the early 70s, Dow perfected the "Principles of Salaried Operations" as its key weapon to destroy union representation. That policy, which remains largely unchanged today, is designed to induce workers to dump union representation by dangling a package of "rewards" that include pay increases of as little as 40 cents, a strict autocratic "command and control" management structure and special parking privileges.¹¹

The company's approach is really no more than a variation of the age old "bait and switch" sales technique. Managers and supervisors lament that union contracts make it impossible for them to "treat workers as individuals." Barnes once used the example of funeral leave. "If a worker needs more than the three days of funeral leave provided in the contract, I just can't give it to him, because that would violate the union contract." Without a union contract, Barnes said, the company can be more generous (and free to dole out privileges to its favored few).

On the surface, that might seem like a ridiculous reason to jettison the guaranteed voice on the job and the safeguards

and protections that a union contract provides. Still, the company's rhetoric—and its technique for repeating such messages incessantly, along with a constant drumbeat of derogatory remarks about unions to a captive audience of workers through masterful use of a company intranet communication system—can and often does put the union on the defensive.

Through its antagonistic, anti-worker policies, Dow has done more than just alienate a workforce which represents the foundation of the company's pre-eminence in a difficult and competitive industry. The company has created a sharp class structure separating its occupational workforce from the main body of company personnel and sending a distinct message that union representation is an unacceptable option. From the standpoint of Dow stakeholders, this belligerent labor management approach has also compromised future profits and growth opportunities by demoralizing the very workers responsible for the company's past success and future opportunities.

Midland, Michigan: Troubles in Dow's Home Town

Midland, Michigan, the home of Dow Chemical, is indeed a company town. Legend has it that Herbert Dow began building his empire in Midland after perfecting a method for extracting bromine from brine pumped out of the earth in Midland. Early in the 20th Century, Dow withstood the efforts of a German cartel attempting to flood the U.S. market to drive young Dow out of business. Dow countered by buying up the German product at its severely reduced prices and reselling it on the European market at a profit.

Dow's business got a major boost with a government contract to develop and test chemical warfare as the U.S. entered World War I. The Army assigned a unit of doughboys to Midland to work with Dow chemists to learn how to handle lethal mustard gas. The unit suffered several casualties and two fatalities in the process.

For the past decade, Dow has escaped any consequences that result from some 90 years of chemical dumping in and around the Midland-Bay City area. In recent months, however, the company finds itself confronting its legacy in Michigan as newly-elected Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm has put the company on notice that she intends to hold Dow accountable for major environmental problems associated with the company's past practices.

Midland is also the home of the Mackinac Center, a rabid right-wing "think tank" devoted to publishing diatribes against unionism, public education and government "inter-

ference” with free enterprise. It’s no coincidence that Dow is one of the Mackinac Center’s heavy contributors. It is no surprise that Dow borrows heavily from Mackinac’s virulent materials to develop its own personnel philosophy and labor policies.

Unfortunately for the 1,100 Midland Dow employees represented by Local 12075 of the United Steelworkers, Midland is often the proving ground for Dow’s union-busting strategies. In 1998, Dow management targeted the Midland local’s contract to obliterate craft work there and to roll out its “low-cost option” plan—a scheme requiring individual units to submit bids and revise work processes in order to out-compete contractors.

In the words of Local 12075 President Kent Holsing, the process is a “stacked deck” where the in-house unit is forced to rely on information and systems provided by a management intent on contracting the work. And, true to form, the Midland local reports that, to date, it has lost about 20 percent of its jobs—over 300—to the “low-cost option.”

The union fought hard to resist company demands that would obviously result in substantial job losses at the site. But, the company used its patented intimidation tactics to rattle rank and file workers and raise doubts about the union. “As the contract expiration date got near,” Holsing said, “the company put up concrete barricades around the plant and brought in the uniformed security guards in big vans with tinted windows.”

Midland is also the locale for Dow’s most draconian response to employee intranet use. In 2000, Dow announced the firing of 50 and various disciplinary actions against hundreds of others for what it described as “improper use” of the Dow intranet system. In news stories, company officials inferred that their concerns related to all manner of nefarious behavior, including pornography and sexual harassment concerns.

“We have to protect our other employees,” sniffed a company spokesman when the story was reported by the Associated Press. The Midland local is still processing some 300 grievances related to those incidents.

The ‘Callous Dowboys’ in Texas

In South Texas, workers refer to Dow Chemical Company’s tight-knit managers as the “Callous Dow-Boys”. Dow’s Texas Operations Division encompasses a large facility in Texas City, a similar operation in Freeport, close to Galveston, a newer facility at Oyster Creek, and a planned state of the art operation slated to come on line in the next two years in Seadrift, Texas.

When the Seadrift facility is complete, Dow’s Texas

Operations will employ an estimated 5,000 workers in the state.

Dow’s Texas City, Texas plant takes up 1,000 acres, dwarfing the line of oil refineries and chemical plants that employ most of the city’s population along that shore of the Houston ship channel.

The Texas City operation is new to the ways of Dow management. It was a Union Carbide operation until 1999 when Dow bought Union Carbide.

Dow quickly converted the Texas City operation to the “Dow” method of doing business. Texas City Operations laid off about 125 workers from the plant which makes commercial plastic materials for the wholesale market. The company brought in a contingent of contract workers to take up the slack.

Within a few months, Dow implemented a plan to rid itself of the Metal Trades Council labor agreement that covered the remaining 425 workers at the plant who belong to 11 craft unions under the umbrella of the Metal Trades Department.

In late 2001, six months before the Metal Trades agreement was to expire, Dow removed a group of senior workers from the bargaining unit and inserted them into “salaried” jobs, refused to recognize Metal Trades union leaders and challenged the representational status of the Metal Trades Council.

Les Uhlman, labor relations director for Dow’s Texas Operations devoted hundreds of hours roaming through the Texas City plant to chat with individual workers, question their loyalty and generally spread and fetch rumors.

The Metal Trades Council challenged the company’s tactics by filing Unfair Labor Practice Charges with the National Labor Relations Board over direct dealing, refusal to recognize the union and meddling to precipitate a decertification vote. Ultimately, several of the key charges (direct dealing, unilaterally removing workers from the Metal Trades bargaining unit and refusal to recognize authorized union officials) would be settled by Dow to avoid a public trial.

The issue of fomenting a decertification election would eventually be resolved in a mysterious turn of events. Dow petitioned for a review of the findings of the regional National Labor Relations Board that the company did not have sufficient reason to challenge the representation status of the Texas City Metal Trades Council. The Board directed its regional office to conduct a “further investigation” which resulted in the regional office promptly reversing its original findings and ordering an election. On October 25, 2002, the

National Labor Relations Board announced that the Metal Trades Council won that vote by a resounding 236 to 106 margin.

Months earlier, despite the distractions of unfair labor practices and litigation, the Metal Trades negotiating committee had pressed ahead with efforts to negotiate a new agreement. The company's initial demands included the elimination of all craft distinctions in the operation, imposition of merit pay and expanded management rights on a range of issues from safety to premium pay for weekends and overtime, and a transparent demand for a one-year contract.

Although the first series of negotiating sessions did not take place until two weeks before the contract expiration date, Dow rolled out an elaborate intimidation campaign—leasing and placing trailers on site with sleeping quarters, laundry and shower facilities. The company issued a—“strike manual” to its salaried workers, directing them to be prepared for assignments of three weeks or more inside the plant gates.

On March 29, 2002, the company ordered the shutdown of its olefins operation in the plant, a move that the company claimed would cost some \$500,000.

After a handful of meetings, the company suddenly reversed its position on a one year agreement and then demanded a ten year agreement. After weeks of unproductive meetings where the company refused to make any meaningful changes in its proposals, it issued what it described as its “last and final” offer—virtually unchanged from its initial proposals aside from some superficial language changes and the 10-year duration demand.

Meantime, information requests by the bargaining committee were dismissed by Dow negotiators as—“none of your business”. The Metal Trades Council filed Unfair Labor Practice charges to the NLRB, but the regional director had become painfully aware of Dow's long reach into Washington and refused to issue any complaints over the company's refusal to comply with information requests.

Just when both sides were telling local newspapers that things couldn't get any worse, Dow suspended Ben Cox, president of the Metal Trades Council, over allegations that he had used the company's intranet communication system without authorization. Cox had communicated details of an in-plant injury to other members of the union safety committee, an action that the union maintained was not only authorized, but necessary as part of the safety committee's responsibility.

On May 9, 2002, with negotiations in recess, Cox (taking

advantage of his forced time off) would travel to Midland, Michigan to attend the Dow shareholder meeting where he spoke during the question period to challenge a proposed company compensation plan as “hypocritical”. Dow's annual report had called for improvements in compensation for management in order to attract talent. Meanwhile, the company was touting another plan—its “low-cost option”—designed to require occupational employees in company bargaining units to compete against outside contractors in order to keep their jobs.

That episode clearly nettled the company's top managers. On May 10th, the Texas Operations Intranet news mentioned Cox's remarks and complained that his appearance at the shareholder meeting had “embarrassed” Texas Operations.

When negotiations resumed later in the summer, Texas City Human Resources Director Les Uhlman began demanding that the union put the company's proposal to a vote. Union negotiators responded that a vote would be taken when they felt the company had made a valid offer, but not before. “We don't tell you how to run Dow; don't tell us how to run the union,” the committee said.

Dow continued to hammer the union, even after the Council handed Dow a stinging defeat in the decertification election. Four days after that October 25th vote, the union voted down the company's “last and final” offer despite recurrent rumors floated by the company that they would be locked out if they rejected the contract. At that point, Dow began issuing conflicting signals—telling newspaper reporters that the company wanted a “fresh start” in labor relations, but firing Council President Ben Cox on the old stand-by charge—misuse of the company's intranet system.

But, the union's experience in organizing to defeat the Dow decertification effort also indicated that the company's tactics were wearing down the rank and file's ability to hold out for a better contract. Eventually, the union agreed to put the offer to a second vote, still recommending that the membership reject the proposal. That vote accepted the agreement by a narrow margin.

The company had “won” the long battle of Texas City. It now has a 10-year contract and a demoralized and angry group of craft workers.

Freeport, Texas Prepares for 2003 Talks

Against the backdrop of the bitter experience of the Texas City unit, three separate units at Dow's Freeport plant are preparing for their own tough fight in the Spring of 2003.

Freeport began operations during the build up for World War II. As with most of Dow, there was a peaceful coexist-

ence between management and Dow unions for the first 30 years of the operation. Dow virtually built the city of Freeport—with company housing for the operation’s workforce designed by Willard Dow, an eccentric Dow brother who had gone into architecture.

Hostilities with the Freeport unions erupted in 1967 when Dow chose to build a non-union plant at Oyster Creek between two existing union sites and refused to allow the union to extend its contract and recognition to the new facility. Oyster Creek was opened up under the company’s “Salaried Operation Principles” and has remained non-union ever since.

In 2001, Dow at Freeport persuaded the Boilermakers unit there to accept a 15-year agreement which contained language effectively undermining the craft lines for the remaining three unions which hold contracts expiring in May of 2003: International Union of Operating Engineers, International Association of Machinists and the United Association of Pipefitters and Plumbers. Keenly aware of the company’s pattern in Texas City, Freeport’s unions are committed to resisting Dow’s ultimatum that they give up the craft jurisdictions contained in their separate agreements.

The leadership of those three unions have forged an alliance to assist each other in the looming negotiations by exchanging information and working together to mobilize local citizen-activists to support their members.

Charlie Singletary, Business Manager for the Operating Engineers at Freeport, said the community mobilization spearheaded by the unions is sorely testing Dow’s stature in a community which already leans toward a negative view of the company’s bullying tactics in local politics and administration.

Singletary, Machinist Business Representative Roy Jones and Jack Brown, Business Manager of the Plumbers’ local at the plant, are working together to challenge a Dow demand for tax forgiveness by the local jurisdiction.

If there is one thing that Dow management hates as much as organized labor’s resistance to its policies it is when citizen and public interest groups have the temerity to challenge the company’s environmental or tax strategies. Dow’s “authorized” company history, “Growth Company, Dow Chemical’s First Century,” by E.N. Brandt, is replete with examples of the draconian measures the company is willing to take when it encounters resistance of any kind—the book cites examples in Germany, Chile, Ireland and California where Dow walked away from potentially profitable operations after company efforts to meddle in local or national politics failed to clear away national, state or

local restrictions for environmental limits or worker protections.

“There’s no difference between running over the local community and trampling the rights of workers who live in those communities and Dow doesn’t hesitate to do both here in Freeport,” Singletary says.

As of February 20, 2003, the fluid situation at Freeport was described in a news account published by The Brazosport Facts, reproduced below:

DOW REJECTS OFFER

By Michael Wright

The Facts

Published February 20, 2003

FREEPORT — Dow Chemical Co. officials have rejected a one-year contract extension with operators and pipefitters.

The unions representing about 1,400 workers at Texas Operations proposed the extension, which called for a wage freeze for workers.

Charlie Singletary, business manager of International Union of Operating Engineers Local 564 said Dow’s rejection was a sign the company wanted concessions from its 1,000 union operators.

“It blew my mind,” Singletary said of the rejection. “We feel that they are going to attack some things that are sacred to the union as far as seniority and competitive pay practices.”

Dow spokesman David Winder, in an e-mailed statement, said short-term solutions weren’t the answer.

“Now is the time to negotiate an agreement that will improve the site’s long-term competitiveness,” he wrote.

Winder said the company wanted to begin negotiations with the operators March 17 and the pipefitters April 7.

Dow wants to eliminate the hiring plan in pipefitters’ and machinists’ contracts, which expire in May. The plan requires the company to use Dow employees for a set percentage of maintenance work. Dow contends it needs more flexibility to hire contractors as a way of controlling labor costs.

Dow has offered to guarantee the jobs of all current maintenance employees, as well as offer buyouts for those who wish to leave.

Jack Brown, business manager for United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters Local 390, said the maintenance plan was not for sale. Brown said accepting the plan would break the union in the long term.

Brown said the proposal for an extension was in line with company-wide plans to reduce spending and postpone any initiatives that would not make a profit in 2003.

“Texas Operations is taking engineers, technicians and other salaried employees off the jobs they need to be doing and training them to run this plant in the event of a strike,” Brown said. “The hiring plan does not make this company non-competitive. They could build a \$200 million plant here and the hiring plan doesn’t call for them to put any Dow craftsmen on that new plant.”

Dow will lay off 3,000 to 4,000 employees worldwide and is making massive cuts in capital spending in an effort to reduce costs. It has already frozen pay scales for salaried employees.

Singletary said Texas Operations management blew an opportunity to save money by rejecting the extension.

“We gave them the opportunity to save money,” he said.

The company, which lost \$800 million in the fourth quarter of 2002, declared a quarterly dividend of 33.5 cents a share on Feb. 13.

Notes

1. Transcript House Subcommittee on Labor Management Relations, March 30, 1976, page 337.
2. “Growth Company, Dow Chemical’s First Century,” E.N. Brandt. P. 302. The employee stock ownership plan was initiated by Willard Dow in 1948. Dow Chairman Carl Gerstacker believed that all employees ought to own stock and that Dow should be their only investment. “[Employees] ought to be deep in debt and have their investment only in Dow stock and own no other investment. Then by golly they would be like H.H. Dow who had his whole life involved in this company. If the company did well, the employees would come out rich. If the company did poorly, the employees would be poor and they would deserve to be poor. But I think they would succeed. Nothing works like working for yourself. We are all full of self-interest.”
3. Excerpt from the Dow “Principles of Salaried Operations: “While there is currently little if any third party (union) activity at our sites relative to this family of employees (salaried); the outside world, including major unions, sees these white collar workers as their biggest opportunity. The three key areas of emphasis in communications, training and preparation should also be applied to this family of employees. In Latin America, unions already represent this family of employees; and in Europe they are represented by works councils. In North America and the Pacific, they are not represented by third parties. In North America and the Pacific, this family of employees is more likely to express dissatisfaction by leaving the company or seeking jobs outside of Operations than through third party representation.” (Emphasis added) From the Basic Principles of Salaried Operations
4. Dow Press Release—Jan13, 2003
5. Testimony of Jeffrey Gibbs, counsel, AFL-CIO Industrial Union Dept., March 30, 1976.
5. February 19, 1969 speech by Joel M. Leathers, Dow Labor Relations Conference, Denver, Colorado: Leathers instructed plant managers to take a “positive” approach by selecting areas of the contract they wished to tighten up. “You then tell the union what you plan to do and let them file their grievances, if they wish. Any subsequent compromise settlement will still nip a little bit off the brotherhood’s restrictions on management and improve the situation from a past practice standpoint. You may not win them all, so what?”
6. Earl Barnes remarks to Dow Labor Relations Conference, Feb 19, 1969 Denver, Colorado: “Unless some mighty unusual circumstances prevail, we should not lose one of these elections to the union. I trust that with you pros looking after our interests in our non-union type operations, we don’t have very much to worry about.”
7. Undated UPI wirecopy. In a 1975 interview with United Press International, Dow Chairman Carl Gerstacker expressed the hope that one day the company would operate off an island in international waters from which the company can operate “beholden to no nation or society.”
8. AP 12/11/02
9. August 11, 1975 letter from Roger Kessler to all Major Managers.
10. Dow interoffice memo, June 12, 1974: “With one of our 1974 goals, the development of two open shop (non-union) electrical contractors, we have set a goal for the development of at least one additional open shop masonry contractor and open shop roofing contractors.”
11. Post-mortems of Dow decert elections in Riverside and Dalton in 1969 described by management officials.



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