**Wildcat strikes at the Gypsum Plant**

> How rules are employed at the Gypsum plant? How the enactment of rules changed?

Gypsum is a mineral extracted from the ground, then crushed, refined, and compacted into wallboard. A gypsum mine and processing plant owned by the General Gypsum Company was located in a rural community, and farmers and laborers frequently supplemented their farm income by working in the plant. The situation in the mine was stable, the management team had been in place for many years, and workers knew exactly what they had to do. Coordination in the plant took place through long-established informal routines that were taken for granted by management and workers alike. Workers did a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay. For its part, management was very liberal. It allowed workers to take the inexpensive wallboard for their own personal use and overlooked absences from work, which were especially common during the harvest season.

The situation changed when the corporate office sent a new plant manager to take over the plant’s operations and improve its productivity. When the new man arrived he was amazed by the situation. He could not understand how the previous manager had allowed workers to take wallboard, break work rules (such as those concerning absenteeism), and otherwise take advantage of the company. He decided that these practices had to stop, and he took steps to change the way the company was operated.

He began by reactivating the formal rules and procedures that, although they had always existed, had never been enforced by the previous management team. He reinstituted rules concerning absenteeism and punished workers who were excessively absent. He stopped the informal practice of allowing employees to take wallboard even though it cost only pennies, and he took formal steps to reestablish management’s authority in the plant. In short, he reestablished the formal organizational structure—one that worked through the rigid hierarchy of authority and strictly enforced rules that no longer indulged the employees.

The results were immediate. The workforce walked out and, in a series of wildcat strikes, refused to return until the old system was restored. It made no difference to the workers that the formal rules and procedures had always been on the books. They were used to the old, informal routines and they wanted them back. Eventually, after prolonged negotiation about new work practices, the union and company reached an agreement that defined the relative spheres of authority of management and the union, and established a bureaucratic system for managing future disputes. When the new work routines were in place, the wildcat strikes ended.