The play begins by introducing the audience to the landmarks of the town; from the local schools, parks, layout of the city, and the Hormel meat packing facilities. It is 1983 and spirit week at Austin High School (today is Pajama Day).

Miss Berg (factory worker) is getting the children (Travis, junior, very into cars, and Jude, 7th grader, very interested in tennis) ready for school while they participate in typical sibling exchanges—some banter, some poking fun, while trying to get out the door in time for school. We learn that Jude is now a vegetarian, which doesn't sit well with her mother. Mr. Olsen/Trig (Miss Berg's ex-husband, factory worker at the Hormel plant) calls to explain he can't pick up the kids because he has an important P-9 union meeting.

At the Bolton house on the other side of town, Amy (sophomore, very into punk fashion) waits by the door for Travis (her boyfriend) to pick her up. Mr. Bolton (a corporate leader at Hormel) comments that Travis is "nothing but lazy." This scene clearly establishes there are two classes of people that reside in Austin—the workers and the corporate leaders.

At the Olsen house, Rosa (the wife of Gunner, a factory worker and Trig's brother) is cutting Mrs. Bolton's (Hormel R&D scientist) hair in her living room, which serves as a beauty salon. Here we meet her son Scott (7th grader) who dreams of being an astronaut, and Carol, who is Mrs. Bolton's adopted daughter. Scott and Jude are cousins and best friends.

Later that day on the picnic benches of the Tendermaid restaurant, Scott's dad and Mr. Olsen enjoy their lunch break, when Travis and Amy show up and they make small talk about the changes to the factory, including ethical equipment, and a new cafeteria that they are not very impressed by. Mr. Olsen asks Amy if she has heard about the accident that Missy Ogleman had at the factory. Scott's dad tries to get Mr. Olsen to not discuss it with Amy but he goes on to tell her how she slipped and sliced off her finger, but that Amy's father, Mr. Bolton said she purposely got hurt in order to collect workman's comp. The kids leave and Scott's dad chastises his brother lightly for talking about that in front of the kids. Mr. Olsen feels Amy should know, and that they won't back down with union demands. In the background, we hear the disturbing noises of the factory.

1984-- The young people are a grade older, it is again spirit week and today is Opposites Day. Mr. Olsen is a P-9 Union secretary. Miss Berg is now treasurer. The union has hired Ray Rogers, a union strike consultant. We hear opinions on both sides as to whether or not this strike will work. The adults argue about salary cuts. The scene closes with the adults saying the town slogan in unison “Where the good life is here to stay.”

Travis picks Amy up for school. Mr. Bolton stops them as they are about to leave. He wants to drive Amy to school, but Amy wants to go with Travis. They argue, and Mr. Bolton yells about the disrespectful way Travis's father spoke to him at the union meeting and tells him to get his father to stop making threatening phone calls. Travis doesn’t know what he’s talking about, and points out that he never sees his dad.

In the next scene, Scott's mom and Scott are handing out flyers for the P-9 rally at the Austin High School gymnasium. At the same time, Amy and Travis are in the parking lot of the Tendermaid where Amy is showing off and dancing in her makeshift outfit which resembles Madonna's from the Lucky Star video. Travis asks her to marry him. Amy says they are too young and that she wants to go to college and get out of Austin, but that Travis just wants to stay in Austin. Amy confesses it's getting difficult at home when her parents say things about his parents.
As the following scene in the Bolton foyer between Amy and Mrs. Bolton takes place, we see P-9 protestors marching into the Austin High Auditorium. They distribute and put on hats and vests and blue trucker hats that read: “P-9 Proud”, lots of T-shirts that read “Cram Your Spam” and many propaganda buttons. People carry signs and posters that read: P-9 Proud. Cram Your Spam. Jay Hormel Cared. We’re Gonna Win. No Compromise, No Surrender.

At home, Amy is angry with her parents because they won’t let her go to the P-9 rally; she wishes to go and support her friends and informs her mother that she and Travis are engaged and that she wants to be part of his P-9 family. They fight and her mother finally gives in as long as Amy takes her younger sister Carol to get ice cream. She tells Amy to “listen to everything that boy and his family say about our family tonight. Really listen. Then ask yourself if he’ll be as dedicated to your family as you are to his.”

In the auditorium, cheerleaders lead a fight cheer as adults chant Never surrender! Never back down! Travis is in the parking lot stealing car parts, while Jude and Scott are playing pretend. Amy arrives with her sister Carol. The kids begin to argue both sides. Amy insists her dad cares about the employees and is trying to do what’s fair for the whole company. Scott tries to deflect by pointing out that Ray Rogers is about to speak inside, which causes Carol to ask who Ray Rogers is (thinking he is Mr. Rogers). Amy informs her that he is a professional agitator who ruins companies around the country. Travis retorts that Ray Rogers is a consultant who helps unions organize, strike, and win. The kids fight back and forth about who will win the strike. Inside, Ray Rogers announces that they voted for him to lead the strike. The adults chant.

INTERMISSION

1985—it’s unseasonably cold for October. It is School Spirit week (Show Your Colors Day) and the kids are all a grade older. The pickets have begun. The labs are shut down. The offices are open, but are surrounded by shouting protesters. At the picket line, Mr. Olsen is leading others in a chant for fair pay. Travis has joined in the strike, putting a wedge between he and Amy. The kids explain there are fights breaking out at school between Hormel kids and P-9 kids.

At the Bolton’s home, Mr. Bolton explains to Carol that it is safer for him to ride in a police car to work. Carol watches him walk through the door and pass the line of picketers, trying his best to ignore them as they all spring to life yelling, screaming, chanting. No one touches him, but it’s verbally violent and awful. When he’s reached the end of the line, Mr. Olsen spits loudly on the ground right behind where Mr. Bolton just stepped. Mr. Bolton stops. Everyone stops. There is silence. He begins to walk again, not looking back. Everyone springs back into yelling and chanting.

Amy arrives at Scott’s house and asks if his parents are home. They are both at the P-9 hall—again. Scott becomes suspicious and asks why she came, because they are fighting on opposite sides. They argue but find common ground that the strike is ruining everything. Amy apologizes and confesses to Scott that she came over to tell his mom that she needs to cancel her hair appointment because of the strike. Amy felt like she needed to tell her face-to-face. They bond over the fact that all of the adults are changing their lives without asking the kid’s opinions.

At Miss Berg’s house, she is ordering pizzas and bagging cookies for the P-9 women’s strike support team. She and Travis get into an argument about his continued dating of Amy, and an argument about her kids not helping her during this. Scott’s mom comes over and tells Miss Berg that the P-9ers have rejected the new contract from Hormel, even though they gave in to all of P-9’s original demands. They discuss how the parent union insisted they accept the new contract and because they continue the strike, they will not get strike pay. Scott’s mom insists that they should just take the contract. Miss Berg is steadfast in her resolve to stand with P-9. Scott’s mom tells her that her husband is going back to work.

Scott’s dad approaches the noisy picket line. He informs his brother, Mr. Olsen, that since the strike is now unsanctioned, it’s time to go back to work. Mr. Olsen insists that isn’t about working, but about commitment, purpose, justice, and family. Scott’s dad says his family deserves to eat, but Mr. Olsen calls him a rotten scab. After Scott’s dad shoulders past, Mr. Olsen spits where he walked and says “I don’t have a brother.” Travis leaves the picket line after seeing his father and uncle fight.

Later that night, Travis and Amy are in the Tendermaid parking lot. Amy is breaking up with Travis saying it is too difficult, that he could get a job elsewhere. She lets him know that she has not mailed her acceptance to NYU because she has also made sacrifices. In fact, she believes when it comes to the strike, the kids are the sacrifice.
Winter 1985—
The picketers are still picketing, heavily bundled.

Scott’s dad is on the phone with a P-9er stating his kid will not deliver newspapers with propaganda taped to it. Scott informs his dad he isn’t delivering any papers because someone sabotaged his bike tire. He is upset because he needs the money he makes from his paper route to pay for Space Camp. His dad lets him know that because he lost so much money while striking, that even his savings aren’t enough for the camp.

In the Bolton’s home, Carol asks if all bacon is made out of pig scabs. She explains she saw a sticker on a truck that said, “Hormel makes scab bacon.” Mrs. Bolton tells her that’s not what bacon is made of and that it is just a grownup joke she shouldn’t repeat. Amy tells Carol scab is a bad name for people who cross the picket line to go to work. Carol agrees not to use it, and wants a good word for people who cross the picket line to work. Amy doesn’t know one.

Scott is guarding his house with a gun. The word “scab” is burned into the garage door. Jude approaches and questions why he is guarding the house. Scott informs her that someone has to protect the house while his dad is gone. He reveals that his dad needs to carry a gun to stay safe. The two argue about who is in the right when Scott asks Jude if her father burned the garage. Jude screams about how her father wouldn’t do that to his own family. The two fight and Jude storms away.

An entire, marching, helmeted, faceless line of National Guardsmen in white snow outfits and snow boots has rolled into town and surrounded the Hormel plant. They carry guns and riot shields. They take their place in line—the former picket line. The old picket line is now held by National Guardsmen. Miss Berg tells Jude that Governor Perpich has sent in reinforcements to protect the “scabs.” Jude asks her mom if the P-9ers are hurting people. Her says they are just trying to make life difficult for them. She presses her mom and asks why the governor would think Austin is a national disaster. Her mom responds with, “Because people in power are always looking for ways to hurt the people who put them in power. And you’re old enough now to know that.”

In the Bolton home, a rock flies through the window and a rifle is fired into the air outside. Mr. Bolton runs to the door and yells after the truck. Mr. Bolton is positive that it was Mr. Olsen—he recognizes his pickup. Mrs. Bolton takes Carol out of the room and Amy challenges her father’s assumption that it was him. Mr. Bolton defends his statement by saying that if he would spit at him and threaten to kill him, he’d throw a rock through their window. He yells at Amy to grow up and admit that her boyfriend’s father is violent. Amy tries to tell her father that Travis is no longer her boyfriend but he is occupied with calling the police.

Miss Berg calls Travis to tell him that his father has been arrested. She asks him to look through her jewelry box and gather as much money as he can find at home for his bail. Travis sells the car to pay for his father’s bail. She confides that she’s not sure what the fight was for because they’re going to lose. Travis assures her that no matter the outcome, it’s okay because they fought. Jude comes storming in the door—Amy had picked her up from her tennis tournament. She is mad because she won the tournament and none of her family were there. Travis and Amy are alone and they make up.

At the Bolton house, Mrs. Bolton is tucking Carol into bed. Mrs. Bolton tries to explain to her why the P-9ers feel the way they do.

Autumn 1986—
It is the launch of the Challenger. The audience is shown real footage of the Challenger take off and explosion. Scott can’t believe what he is seeing. Jude checks up on Scott to comfort him and the two become friends again. They both resolve to “grow up better” than their parents.

Cut to today, 2020—
We hear where Amy, Travis, Jude, Scott, and Carol are today and the kinds of adults they have become. They remember the past, remark on it as adults, and the unresolved that still stands today with what happened during the strike.