

Live Bait & Ammo #48

--The Fight to Organize Toyota--

Workers at Toyota in Georgetown, KY have been pounding the union drum for sixteen years and counting. Progress has been slow but momentum is building. As Outside Track, a weekly pro union flyer, declared, "It ain't over until we say it's over." Toyota is feeling the heat. Several organizers have been fired.

I asked Mark Kinney, a union supporter, why he was willing to run the risk. Mark turned a place mat over on the restaurant table. He drew five concentric circles. He pointed to the smallest circle in the center, "This is Toyota." He labeled the circle surrounding Toyota, Georgetown. The next circle, Kentucky. Then, the United States, and finally, the World. "What we do here," Mark said indicating Toyota, "Affects everyone. If we fail to organize, Toyota will suppress everything. Wages in Georgetown, and Kentucky, and all over the US will be impacted; suppliers, temp workers, the tax base, the general economy, everything."

If you want to build a labor movement, that's the place to begin -- at the heart of the struggle.

I asked each union supporter I met the same question, "Why do you take the risk?"

"We are going to lose it all anyway," Kenny Harper said. "Working without a union contract is a bigger risk than trying to organize."

Kenny claims that wearing a UAW t-shirt isn't a risk. It provides him protection because if he gets fired at least he can go the NLRB and claim he was fired for union activity. "It's better than nothing," he said.

Tom MacIntosh, explained, "I have two grandchildren. I want the children to stay in Kentucky and have good working conditions. Without a union they don't stand a chance."

Many workers are understandably scared to voice their opinion. Aileen Waugh, tells them, "I've been wearing UAW t-shirts every day for a year. I always carry union cards in my pocket. Why are you scared?"

They are scared they will lose their jobs, or the favor they are counting on from the boss, or their chance for an appointment off the line.

The pace on the line is merciless. Mark Miller lost his job due to a 4% restriction in shoulder movement; an injury sustained while mounting engines -- "one every 55 seconds."

The statistical likelihood of repetitive trauma injury increases in proportion to duration. The more you work, the more likely you are to get hurt. If you work on the assembly line at Toyota, incurring an injury isn't a risk, it's an inevitability. Each day brings a worker closer to the painful moment of truth.

Workers with as little as 1% restriction have been told that Toyota doesn't have a job for them. They are offered a minimal buy out and Workers Comp.

According to Inside Track, Toyota's weekly newsletter, by 2014 "some 1,700 team members will have attained 25 years of service."

There were at least 3,200 team members at Toyota at the end of 1989. Thus, 1,500 workers who should be eligible to retire are Missing In Action.

The number of MIA's is telling. Too many workers at Toyota are terminated prematurely because of injuries.

Pete Gritton, vice president of administration and human resources at Toyota in Georgetown KY, told the Detroit News that all downsizing has been through attrition.

Forty-seven percent of the original team members are MIA. Given that rate of attrition less than 29% will make it to retirement.

UAW members at the Big Three expect to work 30 years and very few withdraw without a full pension plus full medical coverage without premiums no matter what their age. A Big Three worker who retires at the end of the present contract at 48 years of age with thirty years seniority will receive a subsidy to compensate for social security until he or she comes of age, a combined benefit that

guarantees \$3,020 per month and is traditionally enhanced with each new contract.

Toyota does not provide a defined pension. Toyota offers a defined "contribution". The average hourly worker at Toyota in Georgetown doesn't have a clue what their monthly retirement benefit will be. While a Toyota worker is eligible to retire after 25 years, they cannot begin collecting from their 401(k) pension plan until they turn 59 and 1/2 years old.

Brenda Donahue told me, "I am 52 years old. I have worked there since 1989 and have \$53,000 right now in my pension. I can retire at age 55 but I will have to pay 20% of my insurance and I won't be able to withdraw from my 401(k) until I am 59 and 1/2 years old."

She has no idea what the 20% premium will amount to. Toyota won't tell her. Also, Toyota reserves the right to "change, amend, or terminate" insurance. It's not a retirement plan, it's a crap game with loaded dice.

Jeff Allen, a production worker said he was willing to run the risk of organizing a union because, "I have two kids. I want to provide for them. I don't want them to provide for me because I have no insurance and an inadequate pension."

Perhaps the biggest hurdle for organizers is the fact that Toyota pays higher wages than other employers in the area. In such cases the only advantage of a union is better working conditions. But competition from non union plants has forced union shops to adopt some of the same dehumanizing processes as Toyota. The difference is, nothing stands between the worker and the meat grinder in a shop without a union.

The Toyota Production System better known as lean production was made famous by the book, *The Machine That Changed the World*. Its authors claim that under the Toyota system not only are workers guaranteed job security, high salaries and benefits, but also a "humanly fulfilling" alternative to mass production.

Takao Kimura, Assistant Professor of Nagoya Economics University, wrote in the *Robo-Soken Journal*: "I haven't seen such a description ever made as far from the reality."

Professor Kimura reports that lean production in Japan has spread to all sectors of the workforce. "Consequently, due to the stress caused by long working hours, intensive labor and excessive quota, sudden death from overwork has been seen among the workers of all job types and all ages."

In the final analysis it will be the employer who convinces workers to join a union by pushing them over the edge. The edge is creeping closer in Georgetown, KY.

Toyota insists that their safety record is as good or better than any UAW plant, but the truth hides behind the numbers. Workers at Toyota try to conceal their injuries. In the Toyota Production System no allowance is made for workers with restrictions because of injuries sustained on the job. If workers admit they are hurt, they may lose their job. Toyota can make pie in the sky promises about their retirement benefits but for most workers the chances of surviving Toyota's brutal regimen is weaker than a politician's promise.

Manuel Eads told me, "One day a team member passed out and had to be rushed to the hospital. I said, 'I wonder if it had anything to do with the fumes?' The Group Leader replied, 'Why is that your business?'"

Auto assembly is a high risk occupation. Few workers can survive twenty-five years on the line at Toyota. As Toyota tightens the screws and increases the use of temps and contract workers, opportunities for jobs off the line diminish. The only way to get off the line is favoritism. Seniority counts for nothing at Toyota.

According to Inside Track management expects 154 workers to accept a voluntary buy out which "will give the company opportunities to hire around 50 team members from its pool of current production temporaries." Apparently the other 104 jobs will not be filled. Inside Track claims that the buy outs will help management "achieve its long term staffing goals."

Union supporters at Toyota are mature. They know the human body wears out. They know The Machine That Changed the World requires a constant supply of human replacement parts. They know there's nothing "humanly fulfilling" about Lean Production.

The only hope for a "humanly fulfilling" alternative to the Toyota System of Production is a Union. The current union drive ends November 2004. If they fail to gather enough cards to warrant an election, volunteer organizers vow to begin all over again.

The fight to organize never ends.

In Solidarity,

UAW Local 2151

Check out the web sites:

www.uawtmmk.com

www.outsidetrack.com

The union flyers coming out of Georgetown, KY are remarkable. They should be used as examples to teach writing at the UAW Education Center in Black Lake, Michigan.

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