

Live Bait & Ammo #186: Do the Right Thing

The contract contained a poison pill coated in a signing bonus. It slid down easy as a Mickey Finn, but had an aftertaste like regret mixed with foreboding: greasy, squeamish, regurgitative as lizard spit.

The UAW Administration Caucus, better known among high seniority as the Concession Caucus, bargained to convene *after* ratification to negotiate two tier wages for new hires. The Con Caucus labeled new hires, “Null class.” Legalese for ‘no-account.’

That’s what provoked nausea — no consent.

I am writing this in January 2021 for a new generation of auto workers who don’t know the history they are piggy-backing. Who don’t know who hogtied them into this corkscrew position. It’s all becoming more clear as the federals crack down. But the news isn’t new. You’ve been getting screwed for a long time.

It’s not a conspiracy. The UAW rank and file put blinders on. Out of sight/out of . . . First, it was parts suppliers, then Caterpillar, then on and on like a train load of Chessie cats winking lights out as they boxcar past into the blue. Who knew? Everyone knew, certain as death, the Big Con was coming.

“Joint funds saved International Reps from the downsizing workers suffered. About a third of our International Reps now receive salaries from the Big Three filtered through joint funds. Workers paid the price of that perfidious compromise but the corporations aren’t finished exacting their pound of flesh . . .” [LB&A#20]

Jointness was a separate contract within the contract. A payoff deal for the traitors. The Cons labeled their political caucus “Administration” because the name conflates the caucus with management of the UAW. Hence, anyone who opposes or disputes decisions is automatically dismissed as anti union, not anti concessions or anti two tier.

In 2002 I wrote a motion to appeal the Con Caucus’ decision to negotiate a two tier deal *after* ratification because it violated Article 19 Section 4 of the UAW Constitution which states: “National agreements and *supplements thereof* shall be ratified by the Local Unions *involved*.” [italics added for emphasis]

A contract is a legal document. But legal isn't worth ink, paper, and broken fingernails if it isn't enforced. A Constitution? Nothing but a wish ruffled by fret and strut. The Constitution, any constitution, is a skeleton, a frame. Make it walk and talk, or crawl into your shroud, my unretired brothers and sisters.

The appeal required support from local union members. The motion would require stealth strategy because the Con Caucus, true to character, would slander, libel, and lie.

At my UAW Local we had a monthly union meeting for each of three shifts. A motion required a cumulative majority of votes from all three meetings. The first meeting was the graveyard shift: a small morning meeting which availed me a cockcrow opportunity to game the floor and punk punt a motion.

I put word out on the down-low and got Krontz to second the motion before the Cons in command could rattle their minions. Dennis Krontz was a fire starter. All I did was scratch the match.

We passed the motion easily. The second shift meeting was 11:30pm the same night. Just the facts: We organized, commanded the floor early, and passed it again. The chairperson looked shocked, pounded the gavel, and ruled the motion "Out of order!"—ex post facto.

"On what grounds?" I asked.

"Because I said so," she said.

We laughed, but she was serious. At a union meeting, unlike a corporate meeting, the highest authority is the membership. We flexed our collective bicep. We overruled the chair . . . ex post prompto.

The motion to appeal was popular among the rank and file. Workers were outraged. Only Corps and Cons wanted two tier. The contract was an IED camouflaged in the same old shit: job security lies. The deal cleaved the union to the bone. Decimation sped up faster than a sous-chef's knife.

The first shift convened two days later. The meeting was controlled by Con Caucus followers who, if they wanted to keep cushy appointments and perks, were required to vote however the local pea-shooter dictated.

I couldn't attend the first shift meeting but I heard the Cons were prepared this time. They showed up prompt and rigid in their company-union-team-polo shirts ready to strip the union of its last vestige of integrity.

The rank and file were up in arms too. Workers understood that two tier threatened the union and consequently our future, both at work and in retirement. Solidarity was shit we understood. It isn't abstract. It's a visceral, gut level, heart pounding experience like a hurricane, an earthquake, a flood. Solidarity is the foundation of the common welfare.

And our common welfare wasn't cargo, it was the ship itself. Indeed, solidarity is the instinctual, evolutionary response to disaster, predators, and chaos. When hell breaks loose solidarity is instinctual.

The person who chaired the meeting wasn't present at the previous shifts' meetings. He portrayed the appeal as an anti union tactic designed to divide the membership. The standard Administration Caucus con — portray every challenge as anti union.

The Sergeant of Arms, Juanita Cadman, was responsible for counting the show of hands for each vote at union meetings. Recognized by the chair, she stood up.

She stated that she was present at all the meetings, and that the chair had mischaracterized the motion. She explained the motion, its context, the vote tallies, and exactly what happened at the previous union meetings.

Thanks to Juanita the motion passed. I now had Constitutional grounds to challenge the International UAW, document correspondence, and demand answers.

One question: who is Juanita Cadman?

I recognized Juanita but we didn't sit at the same lunch table. I was surprised. I asked her why she stood up and publicly challenged institutional power.

"Because it was the right thing to do," she said.

I understand, but other people knew the truth. They didn't stand up. Whatever perks and benefits you were due are in the dust bin now. Why did you take the risk?

“Because it was the right thing to do,” she said.

I know but I still don’t get why you stood up, Juanita. Other people knew it was the right thing to do, and they didn’t stand up. Why you?

Now she was peeved. I had made her repeat one too many times. This ninety pound lady aimed both barrels of her piercing black eyes down the hollow mine shaft of my cranium and said —with all the gravitas of Ron Carter on bass— “It was the right thing to do.” Ba-boom ba-boom. She had a voice like the low end of a trombone.

I said to my private self, I need Juanita for a friend.

We all need friends who not only speak truth to power but truth to friends.

There will be times when I am unwise, if not outright wrong, and wrongheaded about my wrongness. In other words, stubborn to the third power, or more simply, Irish. That’s when I most need a tap on the shoulder, a friend who isn’t afraid to say, “Time out.”

We were in a battle against a corporate giant and a band of solidarity traitors determined to hamstring the union and sucker-punch the working class.

I needed help. I was lucky. The rank and file were primed and Lucy Parsons — personified — was riding shotgun.

After contract negotiations with the Detroit Three in 2003 were ratified —(The Cons had postponed a hearing on my appeal until it was obsolete. The UAW Public Review Board is like a deodorizer in an outhouse.)— work life returned to a grumbling routine.

Back in the day the UAW held national elections every year. Union officials were responsive to the rank and file because they were always running for election. In order to evade challenge and accountability the Con Caucus instituted fewer elections and negotiated contracts with longer durations.

By 2004 enthusiasm for the union was at the bottom of a dry gulch. Any cowboy worth his stirrups would put his hands up and surrender for a cupful of sand and a thimble of whiskey. Union enthusiasm was that damn, dry gulch, dry.

I was chair of the local union education committee. I enlisted members from every corner of the plant. I appealed to their intelligence. I said, We are all readers and leaders. Collect items you think are vital. Articles that inform or provoke discussion on topics relevant to workers. But not specifically Democrat or Republican, Spartan or Wolverine. The object is not to train conformity, so much as incite us to think, examine, analyze, debate, and, what the hell, add a beat so we can dance to it.

We didn't meet after work. We met on the lunch hour in the cafeteria where bosses could watch us congregate. We came back from lunch late, en masse, a spectacle of defiance. We were a force management didn't know how to reckon or beckon: a pack of dogs without collars, leashes, or obeisant natures.

Every week we met and shared what we gleaned in our reading. We selected the most pertinent articles, copied, and stapled them together with a cover page: Uncle Sam finger pointing, "You Decide." Our committee had a product like a church key the way it opened conversations.

Once we had the drill down and the distribution chain cranking, I asked each member to ask one worker from the shift before and the shift after to distribute in their own work areas.

We had an official local UAW education committee functioning as a hand to hand, member to member, diversified distribution network, organized vertically as well as horizontally. That is, organized across the whole plant, on all three shifts, in every direction, every classification and department, skilled and general, male and female, black and white and brown, and yet to be determined. We had the spectrum covered.

When Delphi declared bankruptcy the education committee proved to be a Work To Rule Committee with a speed dial. We had an internal combustion network in place, the official pretense was dropped, and the pedal hit the medal.

We had devised the means to walk the talk.

As the struggle ensued, the target on my back grew piercing hot. My anticipation was when, not if. Whenever my neck was sore from looking over my shoulder, Juanita would say, "Isn't this fun?"

I wasn't so sure, but I knew Juanita made a difference. She constructed a web site and provided technical support, but the essence of her contribution was spirit. She gave everyone, I mean, everyone, a grin. Juanita had a smile that seemed to spring from the floor like an uppercut. A smile that declared, "We're winning!" A smile that made the rank and file feel like sweepstake winners. She put gospel in the song, pepper in the soup, and incandescent joy in the uprising.

David Cole, an auto industry investor and hack writer, accused me of driving Toyota out of Michigan because of a protest at the 2006 auto show in Detroit. I was at the Delphi plant in Lockport, New York that day. Juanita was on the megaphone in front of Cobo Hall leading Soldiers of Solidarity in chants.

Juanita returned home August 13, 2014. She was 59.

How is it, that the people who blow the biggest holes in our lives are also the people who leave the most meaning, purpose, and desire to carry on?

This Ammo isn't a eulogy, it's an analogy, a comparison between the leadership we have in the UAW, and the people we could elect, given one member one vote.

Given is a poor choice of words. Justice isn't given. Justice is won and must be defended every day in a workplace where automation has strip mined the American Dream.

Workers' rights are not defined by law or contract. Workers' rights are defined by struggle. I don't have to explain this. We were all raised on the American Playground. You know the rules.

Juanita is an example of the sort of leaders UAW members deserve. Women who put principle before personal reward. Women who are not afraid to do the right thing.

Death runs through all our stories like the under current that commands the river, the wind that cleanses the sky. It's too late to deny it. Whatever we do now we do for the next generation. Let's get it right this time.

Everyone in the Con Caucus knew the prevalence of corruption. Each and every one of them contributed to the Flower Fund — a slush pile of dirty money. They consciously decided to materially support a corrupt caucus. Did you see anyone resign their toehold

in the Con Caucus? No, that would require integrity. General Baker is the only one I ever heard who gave up an appointment at Sold Our Dignity House and went back to the floor.

Every Flower Funder from Gamble on down should be charged with conduct unbecoming a union member. Just because you brought a picnic basket to the lynching doesn't mean you didn't get your hands dirty. They participated in the betrayal. They contributed dollars to the treachery. They knew. It was premeditated. Not a single one can be trusted. Time to replace the old rotten barrel with a new one.

My wife, Sheila, and I lit candles in 2020 because we have been lighting candles all our lives. Cuz that's what you do, I was instructed. "Show an affirming flame."

We can vote for honesty and integrity or we can go on plodding into the graveyard of democracy, defending the status quo, dependent on the pay-offs of capitalists and the legions of porkchoppers willing to sell out the membership of the UAW for a slice of cheaters' pie.

Solidarity is the first religion, all the rest is commentary.