

Live Bait & Ammo #173: A Tall Order from a Tall Union Man

I told myself I was done kicking dead horses, sleeping giants, and inanimate movements. And then Right To Work For Less came to Michigan like a fiery cross staked in front of my house. This isn't someone else's fight in someone else's yard. These are my people. This is my turf.

At the capitol in Lansing, Michigan the day Right To Work For Less was signed into law, thousands of union staffers working on the clock, and local union officers collecting "lost time" wage reimbursements chanted, "Veto! Veto!" As if the governor who invented the Emergency Manager law to overthrow democratically elected city councils and revoke labor contracts would decide that Right to Work For Less wasn't fair. They may as well have waved feathers at birds and blown smoke rings at clouds.

Laid off construction workers in hard hats milled on the capitol lawn like cattle agitated by the smell of blood. They'd already felt the prod of too few jobs and nonunion wages. Retirees like myself flocked from all over the state scared shitless by the realization: we aren't safe, we're next. We know we are only as secure as the members we left behind on the front lines of the class war.

Bob King, the president of the UAW, told Crain's Automotive News that Right To Work For Less was [not a threat to the UAW](#) because his members are loyal to the union. The lackeys he appointed are loyal to the King and, yes sir, that's all he hears. The rumble from the shop floor doesn't penetrate his royal ears.

I wonder when King last walked the floor of an auto plant where new hires don't have to wait for Right To Work For Less to (1) cut their wages (2) deprive them of a pension (3) eliminate overtime pay with alternative work schedules that erase weekends and instigate sleep deprivation (4) enforce work rules that double down on repetitive stress (5) set break time shorter than a cop's warning (6) inform workers who demand a grievance, 'You're lucky to have a job.'

When was the last time King Bob had less than ten minutes to eat, drink, and ease the aches before he had to get back to bend-lift-twist-and-crank fifty-seven seconds out of every micro-monitored minute?

There's a whole generation of workers who've already been there (a workplace ruled by tyrants) and done that (gave up on a union that enforces company policy) and they, not the bureaucrats and their academic sidekicks, are the building blocks of the new labor movement. Ready or not, two tier is stalking the house of labor and UAW officers are hovering near the exit signs like shoplifters with shifty eyes, weak alibis, and pockets full of hot merchandise.

Hell, everything we are supposed to fear from Right To Work For Less has been a UAW program since the International embraced the corporate agenda — competition between workers and cooperation with bosses— thirty years ago.

Bob King told Crain's Automotive News that "90 percent of UAW-represented autoworkers in right-to-work states have chosen to stay in the union."

I'm not a statistician but I do know my autoworkers and I do check my sources.

It's true. At factories in Right To Work For Less states where the majority of UAW members transferred from plants up north with the golden handcuffs of top tier wages and pensions very few workers pull their cards. Even in Shreveport, Louisiana where there was a higher percentage of local workers hired than at most of GM's southern plants most workers stayed with the UAW.

Kevin Grace who retired from the GM Shreveport plant did choose to leave the UAW. Grace left largely for political reasons. He identifies himself as a Libertarian. Grace didn't suffer any repercussions. Federal law requires nonunion members to have the same level of representation as union members. Though many people agreed with Grace and admired his stand, very few according to him chose to

withdraw from the UAW. "Most people don't like not belonging to a club," Grace said. "They don't believe in getting something for nothing. So they stay even if they don't agree with the politics."

But at the Freightliner plant in Cleveland, North Carolina where the International UAW supported the company when Freightliner fired the bargaining committee, and subsequent contracts dealt management a handful of aces, it's another story.

Franklin Torrence, a former union officer at Freightliner, told me that membership varies from 65 percent to 75 percent. "The number shifts" Torrence said. "It increases before contract negotiations and then decreases when members are dissatisfied."

After an election the losing faction pull their cards. If a worker isn't satisfied with the way a grievance is handled, he withdraws from the union and files a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board. The NLRB is more likely to help a nonunion worker who claims discrimination and who isn't obligated to "exhaust internal union remedies."

Sometimes, it's just the money. Prior to a bonus, members who want to save on dues cancel their membership. Second tier workers may begrudge every bite out of a check that won't stretch from payday to payday. Who's to blame for their resentment? The way they see it, the company and the union both are responsible for their second class status.

There's only one way to overcome anti-union laws and belligerent bosses. Everyone knows what it is and the class of people who live off unearned income do everything in their power to decimate it.

Panic pushers insist there is a conspiracy to disarm American citizens. While we oil our rifles and finger our bullets like worry beads, thieves disguised in suits and ties disable our earning power, devalue our homes, destroy our unions, and transfer the accumulated wealth of our labor overseas. Indeed there is a conspiracy, and the warning reverberates like a [diddle bow](#) strung between unemployment and debt, illness and bankruptcy, the prison and the mission.

Americans aren't controlled by automatic weapons and tanks. We are controlled by fear, by clamors of "fiscal cliff" echoing like foghorns in our sleep. We react like dogs barking furiously to defend the patch of dirt we're chained to.

The kettle of vultures that advocate a bunker mentality raze, ridicule, and undermine the only genuine security humans have ever known — community, fellowship, solidarity.

We really have our work cut out for us. It's tempting to express anger against a company dominated union by not paying dues. One might hope withholding dues would make the office rats accountable. Such reasoning overestimates their work ethic and underestimates the lucrative flow of kickbacks legally defined as [joint funds](#). It pays to sleep with the boss. In a capitalist country the matrimony of labor and management is blessed and the dowry is filed as a tax deductible business expense.

Bob King in an editorial titled "[The Lesson of Freightliner](#)" declared that "success comes from strong partnerships between labor and management." If King's message sounds like Right To Work For Less sweet-talk, that's because it comes from the same playbook.

King, the [son of a Ford industrial relations director](#), didn't mention that in 2007 the International UAW aided and abetted Freightliner in securing the termination of local union officers for calling a strike in response to management's declaration that "there would be [no contract extension](#)." As a result the Good Friday holiday was cancelled and workers were required to work for straight time.

Every union person worth the steel in the toes of their boots knows that you don't work without a contract. Hell, even CEOs won't work without a contract. Try telling a supplier that the contract is canceled and see how many parts you get on Monday. Any self respecting bargaining committee would call for a strike.

In arbitration hearings International UAW officers under the leadership of UAW Vice President General Holifield "[testified as witnesses for the company](#)." Now retired International UAW President Ron Gettelfinger and Nate Gooden, an International UAW Vice President now deceased, had made a

[secret agreement](#) with the corporation [prior to local negotiations](#). Freightliner acted on good faith that the game was rigged. The bet paid off. Five local union officers were terminated. Two survived the lynching.

Franklin Torrence is one of two local union officers who retained their jobs through arbitration. Three of the original Freightliner Five were fired. In light of this betrayal by the International UAW I asked Brother Franklin why he continued to be a member of the UAW and pay dues in a Right To Work For Less state.

"I take the good along with the bad because I believe in the labor movement," Torrence said.

If faith is the sword which cleaves the wheat from the chaff, herein lies the hilt and heft which enables a man like Franklin Torrence to keep his eyes on the prize in the midst of treachery, adversity, and injustice. He doesn't believe in the institution and its legions of office rats, he believes in the movement. Or to paraphrase Mark Twain: Loyalty to my fellow workers always. Loyalty to union officers when they deserve it.

What should we do when Right To Work For Less comes to our state or a union president gets in bed with the boss?

First and foremost, we must speak the truth. It doesn't help to pretend the institution of Labor isn't infected with opportunists who claim we can cure the afflictions of capitalism with a heavier dose of capitalism. No matter what King Bob and his ilk say, pitting workers against workers to reduce wages and foster inhuman working conditions is the agenda of the bosses not the labor movement. Competition between workers is a symptom of the disease not the cure.

A union is forged in trust and camaraderie. If a union stands for anything other than fellowship between workers, it's probably a front for a commercial enterprise. Working with someone who collects the benefits of a union contract but doesn't pay dues is like working with a scab. It must leave a bad taste in one's mouth and that poison is the boss's intention.

In the early nineties at the former GM Saturn plant in Tennessee the names of workers who pulled their cards were published in a "Hall of Shame" section of a union newsletter. It should come as no surprise that the company was footing the bill for printing the newsletter and the majority of workers who pulled their cards were angry at the bargaining chairman. The "Hall of Shame" scheme didn't win any hearts and minds but the boss had an ace in the hole.

After the UAW lost a long bitter strike against Caterpillar, union members, as part of the new contract, had to go back to work with scabs. I asked George Cornwell, a veteran in the struggle against Caterpillar and [a Blue Shirt](#) from UAW Local 974, "How does one deal with a scab?"

"You get close to him," George said. "You're at his side all the time. You go to break with him. You go to lunch with him. You become his best friend because as soon as you abandon him the boss will take your place."

That's a tall order from a tall union man but fellowship, not animosity, is what it takes to build a labor movement that can thumb its nose at Right To Work For Less and scour the carpetbaggers from the halls of Solidarity House.

Gregg Shotwell

Retired UAW member and author of [Autoworkers Under the Gun](#) from Haymarket Press

GreggShotwell@aol.com

<http://autoworkersunderthegun.blogspot.com>