

Live Bait & Ammo #174: Tear the Gallows Down

Last September active and retired autoworkers gathered in the basement of an old church in a Detroit neighborhood that defied the three hallmarks of creative capitalism: Destitution, Dereliction, Demolition.

Judy Wraight, a UAW retiree, asked the group, "Is there anyone here who doesn't hurt?" "Doesn't hurt?" a voice reiterated.

Young and old autoworkers looked around but not a single arm was raised. Pain was our common bond.

It's not difficult to identify the problem. In a capitalist society workers are worth less than widgets. They work us until we're worn out and then they replace us.

In the United States we don't have a jobs program to remedy the dilemma caused by automation, recession, and a catastrophic offshoring policy endorsed by the legislative arms of both political parties. Our government doesn't hire more workers when times are hard, they fire workers.

We have the political will to export jobs and bailout profligate investors, but we don't have the political will to create jobs and retrain workers because in an advanced capitalist society labor is obsolete.

The unemployed are an aberrant statistic ignored like inner city slums; dumped like raw sewage into rivers of oblivious contentment; insinuated into the promise of free enterprise like clear cut forests; swept under the rug of consumer unconsciousness like mountain top removal.

Advanced capitalist societies despise workers. It's not difficult to identify the problem. They don't need us anymore. When humans are replaced with machines workers are relegated to the scrap heap instead of the university. Which brings us back to the subject of pain.

Pain is educational. Pain motivates. Pain demands change. But the solution is difficult to identify because we don't have a solid example of an alternative economic system. Theories don't inspire workers, but urgent need demands that we organize as an antidote to hardship and pain.

The UAW strategy of company union partnership and contract concessions has not only failed to preserve membership and improve workers' lives, it undermines the union's ability to organize. UAW President Bob King's obsession with cooperation and contract concessions has piloted a once great union into a death spiral.

Bob King expresses a desire to organize like a southern belle at a July tea. His aspiration has all the gusto of a coy sigh for good reason: business. The UAW's cozy relationship with bosses and union contracts that mirror nonunion conditions delivers the fated promise of organizing on a gurney labeled Dead On Arrival.

Dawn Azok, a statewide industry reporter for Alabama Media Group wrote: "[Key issues](#) among employees supporting the effort [to organize] are the desire for a better pension plan, as well as more say in work-scheduling and ergonomics issues . . . "

In a follow up [article](#) about the Mercedes plant Ms. Azok wrote: "What used to be regular raises have turned into lump sum payments that are far less lucrative than the pay bumps, they say, and company policies are implemented inconsistently throughout the plant, resulting in a "buddy-buddy" system that's unfair to the average worker . . . Meanwhile, the plant has increasingly turned to temporary workers." Sound familiar?

It should. UAW contracts have eliminated everything these potential union members at Mercedes in Alabama want: from pensions, to raises, to a say in "[work-scheduling](#)." UAW office rats endorse the [abuse of temps](#). We also have the "[buddy-buddy](#)" system, whereby UAW members are appointed to work side by side with bosses to implement speed-ups while the International UAW is reimbursed for salaries and expenses by the corporations.

Auto workers need a union all right, but not one like the present UAW. Some union reformers advocate that members should submit an amendment at the next UAW Constitutional Convention that would permit direct election of International Executive Board members. That's like asking the executioner for a cigarette. Sure. He'll even give you one of your own brand since he confiscated your pack. Then he'll give you a light off the Zippo you inherited from your father.

One member, one vote is a common sense idea. I've used it myself as a visual aid of what should be, but the presumption that the UAW administration will allow such an amendment at the next Con Con is gallows humor.

In 1998 when there was still a remnant of the UAW dissident caucus, New Directions, three delegates, Tom Manion, Gene Austin, and Martin Stuetzer, managed to get a referendum vote on the floor of the convention by subterfuge. The administration proposed an amendment to add a Vice President of Organizing to the International Executive Board. Manion, Austin, and Stuetzer utilized debate on the amendment to finagle a vote for direct elections of International Executive officers. It was a noble effort by Manion, Austin, and Stuetzer, but President Yokich set them up for ridicule. Yokich allowed a hand vote which failed so overwhelmingly that he didn't bother to count. (pages 121-124, 32nd Constitutional Convention Proceedings, 1998)

The amendment for one member one vote is submitted to every UAW Constitutional Convention but it hasn't seen the light of a debate since 1998 because the administration controls the show.

I don't doubt that most UAW members are in favor of direct elections, but the atmosphere at a UAW Convention is too intimidating. UAW members won't achieve direct secret ballot elections for all union officers until there is a significant uprising of the rank and file.

Furthermore, the integrity of an election for international officers wouldn't pass the sniff test until [jointness](#)—the payoff of UAW officers by corporations through the conduit of phony nonprofits—is outlawed. And the "[Flower Fund](#)"—an unregulated slush pool to which all international appointees are forced to donate or lose their jobs—is buried beneath the compost pile of King Bob's broken promises to the rank and file.

I don't believe the UAW can be reformed from within any more than I believe a cigarette from the executioner is a sign of respect. The request only confirms the hangman's power over the condemned.

When the transplants get organized, they will be organized from within by workers independent from the UAW and unreliable on the government. Likewise, the UAW will be reformed, or re-formed, by rank and file workers independent from and in opposition to the bureaucracy by direct action not appeals to hierarchy.

As second tier workers become the dominant demographic in the UAW, the Flower Fund toadies will lose influence. Second tier workers don't wear golden handcuffs. Without pension and health insurance to look forward to in retirement, they're free to start over. The only barricade they need to crash is the pattern of learned helplessness fostered by voting to replace the hangman. When they realize that voting won't change the corrupt system, they will tear the gallows down.

Gregg Shotwell, retired autoworker & author of *Autoworkers Under the Gun* ([Haymarket Press](#)).

Wanted: Outspoken UAW Members
Autoworker Caravan [Speakout](#)
Sunday, Sept. 8, 2013: 2pm— at St. John the Baptist Church,
2371 Woodstock Dr., Detroit, MI
(Just south of Eight Mile at Woodward)