

Live Bait & Ammo #4

--Convention Report--

At the end of the first day the Ad. Caucus of Region 1- D held a meeting for all the delegates in a room larger than the convention hall. The Ad. Caucus has a lot of money. Besides all the freebies, they throw dinners, buy drinks, and generally show the sheep a real good time. (If you know what I mean)

At the meeting the Ad. Caucus explained which resolutions they wanted us to pass. The most significant one, I thought, was the resolution to extend terms to four years and convene every four years instead of the traditional three year schedule. They said it would make our union consistent with the steelworkers and the machinists. One member/one vote would also make us consistent with the other two unions we intend to merge with, but the Ad Caucus couldn't apply the same reasoning when the end didn't suit their means.

(Oh by the way, merge is not the preferred buzz word. Merge implies some administration jobs would be eliminated and bureaucracy streamlined. No downsizing will occur at administrative levels. Thus, the politically correct word is Unification.)

The Ad. Caucus proponents also said the change would save us money. As I looked around Las Vegas I didn't see much frugality. Some delegates boldly pointed out that it would incur added expense to their local because it would throw their election schedules out of sync. Their concerns were ignored. The Ad. Caucus got everything they wanted, plus raises.

The sheep went away happy and nobody had to think too much.

The four year convention schedule signals the International's intention to lengthen Big Three contracts to four years. Corporations prefer longer contracts because they provide stability. Besides GM doesn't have to live up to contracts they sign. Longer contracts have not proved popular with workers, but the four year convention schedule will impose a longer contract regardless of our feelings.

We don't pay much attention to the servomechanism of our union. We focus a lot of attention on the Corporation. And the Corps. want it that way. If they control our attention, they control our minds. If they control the agenda, they control the result. When Jack Smith and Ed Northern addressed GM employees by video last spring they repeated the word lean once every twenty-six seconds.

They are going to drill it in to us until we accept it as fact. What was the union's response? You don't remember? We sent two representatives to a conference on the union strategy for lean manufacturing systems. The report to the membership was so vacuous, no one remembers

anything about it, and we've seen no evidence of an agenda to resist downsizing or to modify the implementation of a management strategy that makes Taylorism seem kind and benign.

What we have seen is implementation of joint programs and special assignments committed to an agenda that will eliminate jobs. Between 1979 and 1997 the UAW lost 763,769 dues paying members. If this was a war, how would you feel about the generals?

Brothers and sisters, this is a war. We must re-establish true democracy within the UAW before we can take on GM. The Constitution gives us the power to make changes. We shouldn't take it lightly. Our livelihoods are at stake, and in the war against Corporate America the union is our only ally.

I went back to my room that night and began reading over the resolutions. I had observed the process. When given the opportunity to speak I should be brief and to the point. I made some notes.

There were two sets of resolutions. One set addressed such issues as: Monetary Policy and Global Financial Markets; Foreign Investment and Influence of Foreign Countries and Firms on U.S. Policy; Economic Democracy and Employer Accountability; The Federal Judiciary and other Presidential Appointments.

Are you bored yet? I won't go on. I don't know who wrote these resolutions but I'll bet there's no grease under their fingernails.

The second set was submitted by the rank and file. These were resolutions a worker could relate to, written in language a worker could understand. These were resolutions that affected us directly. These resolutions were largely ignored by the Ad. Caucus who controlled the presentation. None of them were passed.

I think you deserve to hear what some of those resolutions were.

(1) Several locals submitted resolutions proposing that appointed union officials and special assignment positions be determined by election. Unlike a corporation which is organized from the top down, a union is organized from the bottom up. All power should derive from the members. Non-elected appointments put too much power and influence in the hands of a few leaders and render the appointed person accountable only to those who appointed them. It's a system that fosters favoritism and nepotism. Direct election of all representatives empowers the members, encourages participation, at all levels, and enforces accountability to the workers on the floor. More democracy means more vitality. I would support this resolution. The Ad. Caucus' opposition to the resolution reveals a fundamental distrust of democracy and the ability of workers to judge for themselves.

(2) The resolution for one member, one vote to replace the delegate system would make the UAW consistent with the Machinists and Steelworkers with whom we expect to unify. The present system affords us no real choice. It promotes complacency on one hand and cynicism on the other. The Labor Movement cannot afford complacency or cynicism. We need to encourage participation, direct involvement, and activism. For that reason I concur with Brother Yokich when he said at the convention, "Why change? If you can make it better, do it." I believe we can make it better. I believe we might know more about our Regional Director and his staff if they needed our vote of approval. As it stands now, all they need is our dues.

(3) Local 652 opposed the dues collection from lump sum payments and profit sharing. I would be curious to see how the membership would vote on that resolution.

(4) There were a number of resolutions concerning the merger of the three unions including full voting rights for retirees. What do you know about it? How will it affect the rank and file? What say will we have in how it is organized? Will the merger reduce administrative cost or will it only add another layer of bureaucracy? Would you like to submit a proposal? Would you like to know what's going on up there? Don't worry, my little lambs, the Ad. Caucus will take care of everything. Consider this: In 1979 there were 1,527,858 dues paying members in the UAW . Eighteen years later there were 764,089. How does one measure the success of a union's leadership? Growth? Time to merge. It's a business union, not an organizing union.

(5) There were several resolutions demanding that any changes in the contract be submitted to the membership for ratification. Does anyone out there disagree with that idea? Do you wonder why we would need such a resolution? Experience is the best and the cruelest teacher. A wise person learns from other people's experience. Don't wait to find out for yourself why this resolution was made.

There were also several resolutions demanding we be permitted to read the contract, all the fine print, and not just the highlights before we ratify it. (Come on, Rube, you don't need to read it. Just sign the dotted line.)

In '96 job security was a major concern to all of us, but our questions about job security provisions were evaded. Now we know why.

One of the sticking points of the American Axle agreement was the two-tier wage. The members wanted to do away with it. They were prepared to strike over the issue. The company caved in. Later the members discovered the International had agreed to permit the company to hire permanent temps instead of second tier wage slaves. Some new hires are temps for the duration of the contract. No wonder some people feel burned.

Ratification without information isn't solidarity, it's naive. We could file a lawsuit to demand the fine print, but we shouldn't have to. I suggest that Delphi employees organize and demand full disclosure before ratification.

(6) There were 28 resolutions concerning dues. For instance, a worker who accepts a salary position should be required to pay back union dues or an initiation fee if they return to the floor. What do you think? I agree.

(7) There were many resolutions concerning strike funds and the need to increase the weekly payments. The net worth of the strike funds as of Dec. 31, 1997 was 734,797,299.24. If the International officers deserve a raise, so do the strikers.

(8) There were numerous resolutions involving the rights of retirees. The retirees are important. They could provide experience and support in strikes, organizing drives, and political campaigns. It wouldn't pay to disenfranchise them. I would support any resolution that fostered their continuing allegiance and participation.

(9) Finally, I express regrets that the resolutions to hold future conventions in the Midwest did not pass. We belong in Flint, not Las Vegas. Most UAW workers are concentrated in the Midwest. A central location would be more affordable and give more access to members who were not elected delegates but were interested in attending.

We should be spending our union money in towns like Flint, Defiance, Fort Wayne, Decatur, Toledo, and Detroit.

Most of the resolutions I presented here were never debated. The Ad. Caucus got what they wanted and pretty much controlled the show.

Steve Yokich did exhibit tolerance for dissidents and opposing views and speakers requesting special privileges. He was very much in control. Unlike his predecessor, Owen Bieber, Yokich gave Victor Reuther a place of honor on the stage and showed him the respect he deserves.

On the fourth day the delegates passed a motion referring the "balance of the proposed resolutions to the International Executive Board for action." They were tired. Since all the newly elected board members had won unanimously, they felt certain they would do what was best for all of us.

Delegates were paid for five days lost time, plus expenses, and on the fifth day they voted themselves a holiday in Vegas at the local union's expense.

On a brighter note, a new vice president was installed to take charge of organizing. Another top down maneuver and about 15 years too late, but what can you expect from a service union? Organizing is a grassroots activity and bureaucrats are afraid of activists they don't control. So we got another honcho.

I was only at the convention for one day. My mother-in-law passed away on Monday June 23, and I returned home. So how is it I was able to write more than all the other delegates from our Local combined? Well, some say I'm full of B.S. - I'll let you judge for yourselves.

Fraternally,
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