

Live Bait & Ammo #183: Direct Action Beats Sell Out Bargaining

What do you do if your union is controlled by a Concession Caucus — a bureaucracy devoted to helping the Corps eliminate jobs?

Direct Action Solidarity.

In my book, obeying an order to help management eliminate a union job is no different than crossing a picket line. If a union member willingly assists management in its drive to eliminate jobs, that member is a scab.

Here's the story problem. Simple math. Back in 2003 management, at the GM-Delphi plant I worked in, reorganized the Tugger System, which delivers parts and supplies Just In Time, to eliminate a worker on each shift.

The Local Union asserted they wanted an additional tugger job added on each shift. In other words, the union wanted to save a job and add a job. Management disagreed and countered with a thirty day trial run without the additional worker, and minus one.

In the trial run the new Tugger System failed repeatedly and management persistently required workers in other classifications to compensate for recurrent lapses of Just In Time delivery. The failures were systemic, chronic, and predictable.

A Tugger System is sequential as clockwork. Once it gets out of sync, it remains out of sync until there is a corrective intervention.

It's a pattern of behavior. Management devises an inadequate system, declines corrective action, and blames workers. The method isn't smart, lean, or organized; it's a chaotic, incompetent speed-up. (Story problem hint: who has their hand on the ratchet?)

The previous week I was instructed to do tugger work twice in one day. I complied, and requested call outs. Smile and file as they say. The Bargaining Chairman informed me that a grievance would not be filed because I was not "put on notice," that is, disciplined.

When the grievance procedure failed to confront the mismanaged process, I was left with a choice: stand on principle or act like a scab.

So the next time strawboss asked me to do a job outside my classification, I refused.

"If you don't do it, right now, I will give you a direct order." The bossman's voice gurgled with authoritative excitement. His breath smelled like cod liver oil and burnt garlic.

"Okay," I said.

He blinked.

I waited.

He swallowed.

I waited.

He raised his chin.

Like a golf ball on a tee, I thought.

"I'm am giving you a direct order to do that tigger job."

"No."

"Right. Now," he jabbed his pointer finger into his upturned palm.

I didn't budge.

He blinked.

"You can't refuse a direct order," he said.

"I just did."

"You can't refuse a direct order. If you do, I will have to walk you out."

"That's right." I shut the Bodine machine down.

This was not his game plan. He looked around. Nothing. He looked down at his clipboard as if it was the lost and found. Nothing. He looked up. Nada. He looked inside that dark place where his soul stared like a deer in headlights.

"Do the tigger job," he said in his oiliest voice, "And I will forget about the direct order."

"Is that a direct order?" The Bodine was down. The line was backing up.

"No," he said. "That's off the record."

"For the record, no. For the record, I refused a direct order, twice. For the record, I am writing this down." I took a notebook out of my back pocket.

The line was down. Workers congregated. Strawboss was hip deep in his own shit and sucking air like a catfish in a hard, dry rut.

"Boss," I said, "You got a job to do."

He called my committeeman, Dennis Krantz.

Krantz had this way of cocking his chin like a left hook you saw coming but couldn't do anything about. His chin said, You're about to get clocked, sucker.

Krontz loved this shit. I won't mention the bossman's name but he thought he was Tyrone Power. He had a pencil mustache and eyebrows that wiggled like salamander tails. Krontz enjoyed throwing the breaker on Ty's slick psycho-wattage.

Krontz took over. We convened, which means, we killed time. All the while Krontz and I convened the line was down and T.P. could see production dropping like Ben Franklins in the tailwind of a caboose. We killed more time than Billy Martin on the mound while a relief pitcher warmed up in the bullpen. Coworkers enjoyed the break, laughing and jawboning like mickey-fickeys in the bleachers.

Whoever was waiting for the tugger delivery was still waiting. He shut the line down. WTF. Out of parts. Nothing else to do. More workers congregated. "Fuck it," he said, and lit a smoke right there in the nonsmoking area.

At a 76-A interview (paragraph 76-A in the contract) the boss states in writing his reason for discipline. Then the UAW member has an opportunity to respond and strawboss has to write it down. I took my time like a man who owns his own time and knows the time honored virtue of attention to tiny details when working to rule on company time.

When I finished talking and he finished writing he had to read all the pages back to me before I signed. He had sloppy handwriting and I had to help him with some spelling.

"Pusillanimous. Let it roll off your tongue. It spells just like it tastes."

The shift was over. We could see through the office window workers filing out of the building, pointing back at T.P. and laughing. The salamander tails above Ty's eyes looked 'ratchet' as they say in Louisiana.

Over the next few days I met Krontz a block from the plant and gave him leaflets highlighting the job fight. With organizing it's never about one person, it's about all of us. A victory for one is a victory for all. Krontz redistributed undercover in bulk. Workers knew the drill. No directions needed.

Meanwhile, Jimmy Jean—a mite of smile tucked in his cheek and a gleam in his eye like a whiskey neat—made the rounds on his tugger with a small yellow box labeled, "Donations for Shot." The bosses couldn't stand it. They told Jimmy Jean he couldn't carry the donation box on his tugger.

So, cagey as a Cajun, Jimmy-J put Shot's bright yellow box in the break room. The donation box was replaced by a bigger box every few hours: a visual aid, a message. Support was mounting. Shotwell wasn't suffering, he was on vacation.

When workers get agitated production falters. Machines break down. Parts go missing. Supplies run out. Shit happens. Decisions usually made on the shopfloor get pushed up the ladder to confounded knowledge workers who don't know a ratchet from bat shit.

Profit becomes a fond memory empty as grief.

Office rats feel the heat.

The grievance process is designed to take confrontation off the floor. In the backroom the bosses and the Con Caucus hacks can negotiate until the cows come home and milk themselves, pasteurize, bottle, and date stamp the caps. Grievances don't get settled, they're forgotten like unknown soldiers. Who needs combatants when you have cows?

Within a few days HR called me at home and instructed me to return to work, "Immediately." They'd had enough.

The grievance was settled. Jobs restored and added. Once the rank and file got involved, the bargaining table was tilted in the union's favor.

The moral of the story is: Direct action solidarity beats Con Caucus sell out bargaining.

Stay Solid, Shot