

Live Bait & Ammo #11

--Yokich Keeps Retirees Out--

The next day I was determined to have my say. The hell with short and to the point. I was going to say everything that was on my mind. I was determined to push the Delphi spin-off to the forefront of the convention where it belonged. I couldn't wait for my turn to speak. It might be my last.

Dave Yettaw was one of the first speakers of the day. He said the era of one replacement for every two retirements should end. We need "one for one".

Again, he advocated for the temps who have no voice at the convention although some have been temping for the Big Three under the auspices of the UAW for four years. "None of us would be here today if we'd been temps for thirty years. Part time America is not going to work."

Then he brought our attention to the hundreds of retirees from all over the Midwest who were gathered in front of Cobo Hall. I would like to ask the chair to invite them in with their signs and placards so the leadership could see the issues that are critical to them. "Thank you."

Yokich fumed like the little engine that could. "If you'd been paying attention, you'd have seen us marching with them this morning."

"I was there," Yettaw replied.

"Sit down, David," Yokich snapped.

"I was there," Yettaw repeated.

"You're all done talking. Cut the mic." "The leadership was out there marching with them because they fought for our union," Yokich was screaming. "We were glad they were here," Yokich went on to say that he had provided extra room for them, outside. How generous.

Whenever Yokich gets mad the mob jumps to their feet and cheers like a World Wrestling audience. They enjoy the expression of belligerence. It gives vent to their pent up feelings of frustration and rage. It's a knee jerk reaction instigated by hired clappers, that loyal army of International Reps scattered throughout the audience. But it's not a thoughtful response, it doesn't answer the question.

Why shouldn't we invite the retirees inside the hall? Why shouldn't the assembled delegates take a moment to honor the retirees officially? Why do we shut them out? Why should our Union President respond so hostilely to a civil request? I wasn't impressed.

Shoemaker took over as chairman of the convention of the convention. Shoemaker reminds me of my eighth grade math teacher, Sister Mary Francis. He has that pinched, pasty look of an old woman who is saving herself for Jesus and torturing children to bide her time until He comes.

Can you imagine Dick Shoemaker working on the assembly line? I think every International Rep should work one month out of each year on the door line at Saturn. What do you think of that, Tom Hopp hanging doors with Dick Shoemaker? I think I'll bring it up at the next Constitutional Convention.

The Unconventional Truth

The next speaker of note was Justin West from Local 2488, the Mitsubishi plant in Normal, Illinois.

He began by expressing appreciation for a statement made by our President, Steve Yokich: "If we don't address things honestly, we have a problem." (I knew that line would bite him in the ass.) Part of the new jobs for UAW workers, you spoke of, includes "full time supplemental workers" (temps) who do not receive the benefits and rights that even two tiered workers receive.

This is one of the results of the so called "victory" at Caterpillar. In reality the only victory was that the union survived. To those who view the Cat struggle as a victory, I urge you to take the blinders off and be honest and up front with our membership. I was there when the line in the sand was drawn in Peoria, Illinois.

Caterpillar crossed it repeatedly, and society and government allowed them to do it. We all, as leaders in the Labor Movement need to change that. Go home, Brothers and Sisters, "educate and organize."

Why is it that the simple truth is deemed so radical? Because it upsets the status quo? Because it doesn't call a loss, a victory? Because it doesn't accept that in the "New UAW" temp work is considered "new jobs for UAW workers"? The UAW wasn't built by advocates of the status quo. The UAW was built by hell raisers and truth tellers like Justin West.

A president from Local 2400 in Cleveland whose name I missed, had the best line of the whole convention. He said, "Strike, strike, strike! If we want what we are talking about here today, we'd better let them know we do not intend to go into these negotiations on our knees and come out on our bellies." (I wish I had said that.)

"We're not going to back up or stand our ground where we're at. We're going to push forward and get everything including Prevailing Wage and COLA on pensions." Now that was worth standing up and cheering about.

It was a tough act to follow, but I felt prepared. I'd been listening to our members on the shop floor for a long time. I had a good feel for what they wanted to say. I got my chance.

End the Silence

"Recently I read an article in Chihuahua News, a paper dedicated to maquiladora plants in Mexico. In the article a corporate spokesman criticized Mexican workers because they don't like to move out of their communities for a job.

He claimed that Americans on the other hand gladly pull up stakes and follow their jobs anywhere. Well I've got news for Chihuahua. We Americans do not like to be uprooted and dislocated. We don't enjoy chasing our jobs around the country. We are sick and tired of being industrial gypsies. Plant closing and relocation allowances are nice, they soften the blow, but they also indicate an acceptance and even support for the corporate agenda."

"I believe the corporation is willing to pay the price of relocation allowances because the corporation has an agenda to destroy union towns. I believe the relocation trend is motivated by the corporations' desire to sever the bonds of union workers to their communities. It hurts to be forcibly relocated. It hurts families. It hurts communities. Communities like Detroit, Flint, and Anderson, Indiana are graphic examples of the destructiveness of corporate restructuring and relocation."

"We need to demand commitment and responsibility from the corporation to the community. We need to encourage and reinforce and demonstrate the UAW's bond to the community in order to act like a genuine social movement. We need to demand that product development, transformation, and investment considerations give priority to existing plants and their communities, communities like Detroit, Flint, and Anderson, Indiana."

"Yesterday, Brother Yokich said he was surprised by the announcement of the Delphi spin-off. I don't know why. No one on the shop floor was surprised. We've been talking about it since 1995."

"Indeed on page 413 of the '96 Agreement with GM it states that the Human Resource Center was 'renamed' the Center for Human Resources and reconfigured to accommodate a 'restructuring within the corporation' namely 'DELPHI AUTOMOTIVE SYSTEMS' 'The Center for Human Resources', the tax exempt non-profit corporation which administers the Joint Programs and Relocation Allowances had to be renamed and reconfigured in order to satisfy the legal ramifications of the spin off with the IRS."

"We saw the corporate offensive coming from a long way off. What we haven't seen is the counter-offensive of the UAW against the GIANT MODULAR ASSEMBLY OUTSOURCING SCHEME called DELPHI."

"Ed Northern, Delphi's guru of lean, has visited our plant three times since the announcement of the spin-off and he will be back again after Easter. But we haven't seen or heard anyone from the International contradict the news that it's a done deal. All we've heard is that we can retire

under a GM contract if we get out before October 1999. That's not a deal, it's an ultimatum, it's a threat."

"Three top level managers in our plant have retired since the announcement of the spin-off and two quit to work for furniture factories. Our Bargaining Chairman retired. What does it tell us about the future of Delphi when the people in the know jump ship? We don't want a good deal. We want the damn deal stopped."

"If the Delphi spin-off is a done deal, then Visteon is a done deal, Accustar is a done deal, and Modular Assembly is a done deal because Delphi is THE BIGGEST ASSEMBLER OF MODULAR AUTOMOTIVE SYSTEMS in the world."

"Stop the Delphi spin-off dead in its tracks or just come out and tell us the truth now. END THE SILENCE."

"Give us the information we need to make the best decisions for ourselves and our families. If it is a done deal, we demand a National Pattern Contract for all parts plants no matter what name they go by or how they are reconfigured on paper."

"We need wage and benefit parity not prevailing wage which is nothing more than a code name for wage cut. How can we hope to organize parts plants if all we have to offer is 'prevailing wage'? They've got prevailing wage and it stinks. We want parity with the Big Three for all parts plants."

"Furthermore, we must demand Portable Pensions that travel with us wherever we go without losing credit because we don't know who we will be working for tomorrow, or what name they will go by, or where or how they will dislocate us."

"Brothers and Sisters if you work for one of the Big Three today, BEWARE. MODULAR ASSEMBLY will take the skill out of assembly and undermine your bargaining power. The corporation has an agenda to emasculate the union. STOP THE MODULAR ASSEMBLY OUTSOURCING SPIN OFF SCHEMES NOW."

Shoemaker responded. He said the name change "had nothing to do with the Delphi spin-off." It was simply for "IRS regulations."

I wanted to go back to the mic for the last word. I had a lot to say about that, but there is no real debate at the convention. It's not as democratic as the Cooperative Caucus makes it out to be.

The IRS demanded a change in the contract because of a restructuring in the corporation. If it wasn't Delphi, what was it?

Last month we were forced to watch a Delphi video called Get Lean that featured among other things, an International Quality Network Rep who said he'd been working on Delphi's "joint lean

manufacturing techniques" (which is a fancy phrase for job reduction, speed-ups, multiple tasking, and management by stress) "since 1995."

The Center for Human Resources has been involved with the spin-off from the beginning and the UAW sits on the board of directors of that tax deductible charity organization. Answer that, Dick.

Pensions and Health Care:

We Want Parity with International Reps

Gettlefinger took over as Chair. His name reminds me of a dirty joke, but I wouldn't know, you'd have to ask union members at Ford about that. He looked innocuous as a finger puppet to me.

We began to discuss pensions. Everybody wants COLA on pensions. The International insists that "our negotiated pension increases have consistently provided more inflation protection than a cost-of-living formula."

If that was true, the corporations would give us COLA on pensions rather than lump sum payments. If that was true, why did International Reps negotiate COLA on pensions for themselves?

There was no divisiveness among the delegates on this issue. It was unanimous. We want COLA on pensions and we want the same health care benefits that International Reps enjoy like 730 days of hospital and extended care. And we want it now.

A delegate from Local 600 said he was glad to see the "portability" concept was finally a part of the resolution on pensions. But he hoped "it's not because we are envisioning more dislocations of our people what with the spinoffs of Delphi and Visteon. If we come back with a pension formula that's equal from the International level to the shop floor level, we won't have any trouble selling it to the membership." That man's got a left hook sweet as Sugar Ray.

"Tearing Our Local Apart"

There was also an unanimous consensus to abolish two tier wage structures and the practice of hiring temps.

A delegate from Local 1237 said, "Two tier wage is tearing our Local apart."

When Freddie Willbanks addressed this issue he was true to form.

He included the underpaid, the supplemental, the temporary, and the low tier. "I stand in opposition to the watered down weak language on economic issues. It is immoral and wrong that after 90 days workers are not made permanent with full recall rights."

"It is immoral and wrong that not all workers have full medical benefits. It is immoral and wrong that some workers don't get equal pay for equal work."

"Furthermore, we need portable pensions for the industrial gypsies. We must knock off the spinoffs. Stop Modular Assembly. It will reduce our standard of living. It will diminish our base of support for future pension and health care benefits. Some people in this union have COLA on pensions and some don't. We all deserve COLA on pensions. We want COLA on pensions this year."

Health Care & The Competitive Agenda

Many people spoke out against HMO's, the restriction of medical and behavioral health services, and the unconscionable application of the profit motive in the area of health care. Some people had the courage to tell personal stories of hardship caused by restrictive HMO policies.

For my part I said: "We have been led to believe we have good health care coverage, and that we have resisted any takeaways. But in an effort to help the corporation reduce costs, health care services have been cut and we have been forced into profit hungry HMO's."

"When members suffer catastrophic illness they discover there are loopholes in the contract. Many union members have accumulated enormous debts while battling for their lives or the lives of their loved ones."

"We need to close the gaps in our health care coverage. Health care decisions are being decided by the cost effective criteria of the competitive agenda. We need to oppose the competitive agenda in the health care field, not support and endorse it."

"Profit driven HMO's care more about the bottom line than our lives. Families in crisis are spending valuable energy fighting with insurance companies for the help they deserve at the very moment when they need all their strength to battle a life threatening disease. Families are forced to decide between the life of a loved one and their homes."

"We should resist the proliferation of profit motivated health care providers. We deserve the same health care coverage that you, the International Reps get. It's only fair."

"Autoworkers' Version of Black Lung"

In the area of Health and Safety several delegates pointed out that we needed to do more to improve air quality in the workplace. A delegate from Local 72, a Kenosha, Wisconsin Engine Plant, told of a union brother who said, "Returning from layoff was the worst decision I ever made. I'll never work again."

He explained that many workers in his plant had contracted Hypersensitivity Pneumonitis, an occupational respiratory disorder caused by machining fluids. "People in the prime of life are

unable to work. It's the autoworker's version of Black Lung." He explained how exposure levels can be contained with enclosures and mist collection systems. "We have to make the corporations do what it takes." Spend money to save lives.

The Best Way to Organize

The call to organize was the one solidifying refrain of all the disparate voices. But the convention was not well organized. There was no allotted time for breaks or lunch. Consequently people were always coming and going. It looked like a Convention for Attention Deficit Disorders.

A good third of the delegates were usually not in attendance at any one time. Scheduled breaks and lunch would have provided more structure and cohesion. One delegate whose name and Local I was unable to discern above the din of the distracted crowd said: "The best way to organize is to get workers to believe in unions by winning grievances, putting an end to concessionary bargaining, and standing strong against antisocial corporations." Read that statement again. It's worth repeating.

A Schmuck

That night as I walked through the bar to the meeting room someone pointed out an assistant to President Yokich seated in a booth strategically situated to observe everyone who entered.

I wondered what else he did for a living. I wondered if that was our dues dollars at work or another example of the flexibility of joint funds. I wondered why Yokich felt he needed a spy when we were obviously the most wide open, up front, outspoken union members at the convention. The schmuck wasn't there when we left.

The Hot Button

Reaching a consensus with a roomful of dissidents is a contradictory proposition of invariable odds, but we all agreed that Delphi encompassed a host of hot button issues: outsourcing, modular, lean, corporate restructuring and relocation, two tier wages, job security, and the future of our pensions.

We agreed to focus on the spin-off. None of us expected to get called on. We'd have to use every maneuver at our disposal to gain the floor. Whoever could gain recognition would raise the issue again.

Erwin Baur, an 83 year old labor activist who was organizing for the CIO back in the 30's pulled me aside and graciously took the time to coach me. "Forget your notes", he said. "Speak from your heart. Think on your feet."

In Solidarity,

UAW Local 2151