

## Live Bait & Ammo #10

1999 UAW Bargaining Convention

I went to the Bargaining Convention with one concern in mind: the Delphi spin-off. No single event in my twenty years of experience as an auto worker has caused so much chaos and disruption : early retirements, hasty transfers, dislocations. Is it the beginning of a calculated dismemberment of the union, or the final stage of a corporate war against the rank and file?

Dave

Yettaw said it best, "The UAW has been playing checkers while the corporations have been playing chess." It feels like we're caught in an endgame, two moves behind and minus the queen. The big question on every one's mind is what will the UAW do and why haven't we heard anything? We have a right to know. It's our business. No one at Solidarity House will lose their job or their pension as a result of this corporate shell game. In fact a separate corporation will only create another level of union bureaucracy complete with a new vice president and the requisite entourage of staff.

Only union members on the shop floor will pay the price. Only union members on the shop floor will be dislocated, pressured into early retirements, forced to accept concessions, speed ups, the humiliation of a two tier wage, and mass produced outsourcing. The only members who are truly partners with the corporation are International Reps and their appointees. The 'no news is good news' slogan does not apply. We got the news. It's bad. We're waiting for a response from the UAW. The cold silence coming out of Solidarity House is ominous. As I drove to Detroit I had the same feeling of impending doom almost everyone else in Delphi has had; I'm afraid we're going to get screwed.

Lots of folks have transferred to the first available opening at a GM plant in hopes of gaining job security. Many will retire, ready or not, in order to secure a GM pension. Some think we will be okay if we accept a two tier wage, as if sacrificing new hires on the altar of competitiveness would buy us a blessing from the merciless gods of commerce. Others do nothing but plod along in the dumb bliss of an infantile faith in union/management leadership. A lot of people are in denial.

We can't depend on corporate or union leaders for security. When leaders are ethically but not legally obligated, they will take advantage of you for their own selfish ends. Then, they will demean and disrespect you in order to justify their behavior and suppress their guilt. I'm not making this up. It's empirical truth, historical fact, lessons learned from the school of hard knocks and common sense. You can't trust your fate to leaders who in the words of Samuel Gompers don't earn "their bread by daily labor," and I might add, scoop their butter from the corporate

trough. Paying someone else to take care of our business is the root of our problem. You can trust someone to take your money. You can't trust them to take care of your business. We will have to take care of ourselves.

Our only real security is in solidarity. If we let the corporations split us up into ever smaller groups and multiple tiers, one by one they will destroy us. If we are afraid to voice our concerns to union leaders, we don't deserve the UAW legacy, or the privilege of being a convention delegate. Brothers and Sisters, a transfer will grant you a short reprieve, not a safe passage. If you believe there is job security with GM I have to ask, where the hell have you been for the last twenty years? Stand and fight or you will be running from the bully all your life.

Brothers and Sisters, you can retire now, get out while the gettin's good, I can't blame you, but I have to ask, what's to prevent GM from slashing your benefits and denying COLA on pensions. Oh, that's right. There is no COLA on pensions. There is no guarantee you will ever see another raise. Retirees are dependent on union members they left behind and cannot rely on the benevolence of the company. That's why the two tier wage is totally unacceptable. As corporations continue to cut the workforce the burden of retirement will become insupportable. If you retire now and leave the battle to a union member making half your wages, you can kiss your happy retirement dreams goodbye.

Brothers and Sisters, if you expect the union to cut some sweetheart deal in the back room whereby you walk away with your pockets full and your hands clean as an attorney's fingernails, you'd better suck yourself up to an International appointment and a joint job paid for by the Center for Human Resources that tax exempt nonprofit corporation funded by GM whose primary purpose is to mitigate resistance by orchestrating the partnership follies, administering relocation allowances, facilitating outsourcing decisions, training UAW members for a new career in VCR repair, and directing union members' energies toward competing with other union members rather than challenging the real enemy of working families, Corporate America.

Know in advance there aren't enough joint jobs to go around for everyone. You have to be special. About 30% of our International staff are special enough to have their salaries paid for out of joint funds and you can bet your union dues they know who butters their bread and pays allotments and expenses and trips to Vegas.

Joint funds are used to buy labor peace as when striking union members in Flint last

summer were reimbursed vacation pay from joint funds. How is it that a tax exempt, non profit corporation set up for training purposes pays production workers compensation for wages and negotiated benefits? Ask the legal scallywags, but don't worry, it's only a coincidence that the initiation of jointly funded cooperation programs coincided with the downsizing of the UAW while according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics the actual number of auto jobs in America increased. It's only a coincidence the International staff wasn't downsized along with the rest of us. It's only a coincidence that the UAW Constitution has no oversight provisions for the use and administration of joint funds. It's only a coincidence that joint funds are as tax free as the redistribution of GM's Delphi stock.

The only real security is with the true union, the collective will of the people. If we don't hold our leaders feet to the fire and win a contract that is good for ALL of us, there will be no security for any ONE of us. We can't cut deals that protect some at the expense of others. Without solidarity, job security is nothing but a moving target.

As I drove to Detroit I felt angry. Angry at the silence of the International UAW. Angry at the lack of action and direction. Angry about capitulation and concession. Angry because the International UAW seems so remote and unresponsive. Angry at the secrecy. Secrecy fosters distrust and cynicism. Secrecy implies slickness and deceit. Secrecy is shady. Secrecy is the enemy of truth, justice, and democracy.

I am angry, and I am sick and tired of hearing Yokich proclaim "the UAW is a social movement" while he binds us with jointness agreements to anti-social, anti-union, anti-family competitive agendas. My Local Union is being torn apart by the Delphi spin-off and no one in Solidarity House seems to care.

DAY ONE: Text and Sub Text

Yokich opened the Convention by saying, "If we don't address things that face us honestly and up front, we have a real problem." (I've been taking notes long enough to know that remark will come back to haunt him.) Then he claimed he had no prior knowledge of the Delphi spin off. (Where's he been? On the shop floor we've been talking about it for years.) "And that's what pisses me off about GM", he said. (Yokich doesn't tell us anything and that's what pisses us off about him.) Yokich revealed that when GM decided to sell off American Axle they came to the International before hand (Were you folks at American Axle informed of that?) and together they "worked out a pattern agreement." (No mention of lost pension credits and dislocated families.) He took a firm stance against modular assembly, he said it was "another word for outsourcing". (He hadn't addressed the modular issue until Suman Bohm confronted him at a sub-council and Dave Yettaw published an article in the Flint Journal about the damaging consequences to working

families and our communities. Up to that point Yokich had remained silent. Rick Haglund of the Grand Rapids Press reiterated what most auto analysts have said. "Union silence is considered by management to be a positive sign." I believe it went further than tacit approval. Lordstown and Lansing had already entered negotiations on modular and begun whipsawing. Does anyone believe

that Yokich and Shoemaker were unaware of those negotiations?) He said we needed to make outsourcing a "strikeable issue". (Delphi is the largest maker of modular automotive systems in the world and the spin-off is the most massive outsourcing plan in history. So when do we strike?)

He said we needed to find ways to restrict overtime. (I hope that doesn't mean more money for joint funds.) He claimed "A forty hour restriction would create 86,000 jobs in motor vehicle assembly alone." (So let's quit stroking the Trojan Horse they call profit sharing and bring back PPH days and the campaign for a shorter work week.) He railed against the corporations for moving jobs overseas, but still no mention of Delphi which has moved more jobs to Mexico than Ford and Chrysler combined.

### The Delegates Speak Out

There were about 2000 delegates, plus guests, and an army of International Reps jammed into Cobo Hall. Microphones were spaced throughout the hall for delegates to address the assembly. While International Reps speaking from the podium were always clearly audible above the din of the crowd, speakers from the floor were very difficult to hear. I couldn't catch everyone's

name or Local Union. Many of the delegates called on to speak were merely lap dogs for the Cooperative Caucus. I won't repulse you with alliterations of their lapping sounds.

It was a welcome relief when Suman Bohm approached the mic. Suman is the Bargaining Chair at the Boxwood Assembly plant in Delaware and a co-chair of New Directions. She's an old soul whose fiery spirit and sheer courage sharpen conviction like oil and stone. She spoke out against outsourcing. She demanded the International "put the brakes on Modular Assembly". She said, it "would kill us" and was really nothing more than a "union busting" scheme. She denounced GM for closing Buick City and sending the work to China where "they can't drive big cars" because the streets are too small. "Production in China is designated for export to America."

The next speaker who caught my attention was Wendy Thompson from American Axle. I remembered her from the Constitutional Convention. She's one of the best and most natural orators

I've heard. She said that American Axle provides "the model for the Parts Industry because we have a pattern agreement with the Big Three." She insisted that pattern agreements should be the

goal for all parts plants, or "Delphi, or any other spinoffs, or modular suppliers." She emphasized the need to get members involved in organizing and noted "three American Axle plants that are non-union." That's three weak links in the chain and those plants should receive "top priority".

Mark Paine from an engine plant in Cleveland said that “Despite overall job growth union jobs are disappearing.” He denounced whipsawing, (the practice of Locals competing with other Locals to make concessions. It’s a scabby practice.) He said his Local jumped through all the hoops, “embraced the Modern Operating Agreement, and every other program they came up with”

and now they’re “scheduled to be phased out.” It was a familiar refrain. I heard it over and over at the Convention: the Cooperative Caucus strategy is a failure. We aren’t partners, we’re victims. We’ve been conned into turning tricks for promises while corporate executives laugh at our antics.

Freddie Willibanks from Local 599 in Flint described the devastating impact the closing of Buick City had on Flint. He denounced GM for their callous disregard of employees and communities. I like Freddie Willibanks. I don’t know how he does it but without uttering a single preachy word he reminds all of us that the struggle for justice, equality, and truth is a spiritual business. I guess he just lives the word.

Several delegates spoke out against the Ford/Visteon spin-off and it hadn’t even happened yet. They weren’t waiting for the International to take care of them. I was envious of their preparedness, but I also took heart. I figured I could count on them for support when my turn came.

### We Can Stop the Spin Off

When Dave Yettaw took the floor you could feel the hair stand up on Yokich’s neck. Steve was bristling before Dave even opened his mouth. I have the impression Brother Yokich doesn’t like anyone who treats him like an equal and fails to tremble before his authority. Dave Yettaw who

came out of retirement to head up the delegation from Flint Local 599 is a fearless challenger. Unlike Yokich he doesn’t resort to angry outbursts and profanity to make his point. He’s calm, polite, matter of fact, and direct. Yokich clearly felt threatened by Yettaw. Throughout the Convention Yokich attacked Yettaw personally but left his challenges unanswered. Yokich in my estimation was too intimidated to debate the issues on their merits. Instead he resorted to verbal

harassment, intimidation, and orders to “Cut the mic!” I was embarrassed for our president. He didn’t conduct himself like a gentleman or a professional. You may not agree with Dave Yettaw but

you have to respect (or as in the case of Yokich, fear) his intelligence, perseverance, and willingness to stand up for what he believes in. That’s a lot more than you can say for most of the tail wagging wet nose lap dogs that pass for convention delegates.

Yettaw calmly asked that GM be made to “live up to the 95% job security agreement that

was negotiated three years ago.” He warned that Modular Assembly would be devastating to all of us and would result in “outsourcing on a scale we’ve never seen before.” He advocated for the Temp Workers that are pervading the industry. He said, “This union stopped loccoca from spinning off Accustar and we can stop Delphi and Visteon from being spun off too.”

#### A Raw Nerve

A delegate from Local 1866 said, “My members are living the fears of the unknown everyday as Delphi is spun off from GM. Brothers and Sisters are leaving at an alarming rate through retirement and transfers, causing family hardships. Delphi counts on bargaining a contract that calls for lower wages and benefits including a two tier wage and benefit package. Management says the spin-off will be good for everyone, I don’t believe it will be good for the UAW. It will divide the parts sector from the assembly sector. Thus reducing our bargaining leverage. I support Steve Yokich when he said that GM must retain majority interest in Delphi. We must stop the trend of spinoffs and sales. I urge the UAW to take a hard line against GM and Delphi and all the other spinoffs and sales.”

I liked what I was hearing. I sensed a raw nerve in the crowd. They’d been pushed around too long. They were anxious about outsourcing and modular and downsizing. The folks from Ford’s parts division, Visteon, were carrying STOP the SPIN-OFF picket signs. The atmosphere was ripe for a campaign to stop the Delphi spin-off.

Willy Hubbard, president of Local 550, stepped to the mic. He sounded like a howling wind from Chicago they call “The Wolf”. The UAW has negotiated positions to “give us a voice in quality, health and safety, and benefit decisions. One of the things that disturbs me the most,” (It was eerie. Cobo Hall was quiet as a church when he spoke.) “is that some of these appointees think they are CEO’s of the Union. We have to return the respect to the floor and remind them they are union reps not CEO’s. These programs were designed to give members an equal voice. The only way we can make sure we live the life as well as work the life of union is by voting for appointees.” His speech hit the floor like a cluster bomb. A number of appointees had to be evacuated on stretchers. But they had only fainted.

“Next”

I’d never spoken at a convention before, or to such a large crowd. It’s scary, but I had to take a chance. I thought, I’ll keep it short and to the point. I waved my Local 2151 sign in the air.

Yokich called on me.

When you step to the mic your image is projected onto two giant video screens. I looked like the fifty foot man. I felt like stomping down to the Renaissance Center and kicking some corporate butt. Instead I made a short impromptu speech.

“Brother Yokich, you compared American Axle to the Delphi spin-off. But there is a difference. American Axle was sold. Delphi will be owned and controlled by the exact same group of people. It’s a paper shuffle not a real transfer of resources. Workers at Delphi see the spin-off proceeding full speed ahead but we do not see or hear the opposition of the UAW. The UAW’s silence and lack of visible resistance to the spin-off is perceived as consent. As a result many workers are being scared into early retirement or hasty transfers that destabilize families and disrupt communities. If the spin-off of Delphi is successful, other spinoffs will follow and an undertow of competitive forces will shatter our solidarity and shred the principle of pattern bargaining. STOP THE DELPHI SPIN-OFF IN ITS TRACKS”

Brother Yokich said, “Next.”

Job Loss and Job Degradation

A brother from Local 1216 in Sandusky, Ohio said that Ford/Visteon workers “feel the threat of job loss and job degradation. We must find a way to link all Independent Parts Suppliers to assembly agreements that will prevent whipsawing. Our members are prepared to do whatever is necessary to protect our jobs.”

Then Suman Bohm got the floor again. She said, “We are losing tens of thousands of jobs to outsourcing because outsourcing language in our National Agreement is too weak. The language is so full of pro company loopholes that the company could be brain dead and still get away with taking our jobs. In the ‘99 contract we must make outsourcing a strikeable issue on the local level.

We have to get away from two tier wages and make sure all new hires are brought up to par after 90

days, not three years. We have to help our brothers and sisters in the parts sector.” She explained

that union density has fallen from 75% to 15% in the parts sector. “This is ridiculous. We have to help them get what they deserve which is wages and benefits equal to our own.” Suman Bohm doesn’t pull any punches.

Another brother pointed out that the wage gap between parts and assembly workers used to

average about seventy cents. Now the gap is over seven dollars.

Edward Mosley, a big, Big man from Local 34, an SPO in Atlanta, said his local was the home of the original sit down strike in 1936. "We are closing. Only half of our jobs are moving. The governor offered GM incentives to keep us, but GM said it's not about money. So this is about us. Wherever we go we're going to be union. We're not going to go down without a fight. We sat down in '36 and we'll sit down in '99." I didn't know it then but two days later I would shake Brother Mosely's hand and thank him for his support.

### The Rocker Delivers

Steve "the Rocker" Derickson who writes "The Rocker" the best, most prolific and consistent independent union news letter in the country scored a point with all the assembly workers when he pointed out that productivity "has risen astronomically but we are working under relief standards set in the 60's. We need relief standards commensurate with productivity gains." Derickson's idea would create jobs, but it doesn't fit with the competitive clause in the joint agreement. That's the catch. The Cooperative Caucus has tied our cart to the donkey instead of the horse.

A brother from a Delphi plant in Athens, Alabama was so angry about the spin-off he could hardly spit the words out. I don't think he could find words vile enough to express his feelings. But the way he pronounced "Delphi" conveyed enough disgust to choke a crocodile. We got the message and we applauded.

### Double Barrel

Marty Stuetzer and Kirk Comstock from Local 594, GM Truck and Bus in Pontiac, got up back to back like Colovito and Cash and laid out a story of downsizing "from 14,000 to 5,800" that sent a chill like a warning shot through the audience. Appendix L doesn't stop outsourcing, it's a legal maneuver to break up resistance. We'll never get the lowest bid. We don't want the lowest bid. To hell with Appendix L. Fight or get raped.

A brother from Local 1250, an Independent Parts Supplier, said we should stop talking outsourcing and start talking insourcing. "While members are losing jobs others are working more hours just to make ends meet." He gave stats on declining wages and union density in the parts industry that sounded like a report from a third world country. The parts industry is a third world country right in our midst. "If it takes a strike to stop the downward trend, so be it."



## Trust Betrayed

Dean Braid from Local 599 was one of the last speakers of the day. Dean has worked 20 years at Buick Engineering. Ward's Automotive Magazine has awarded Buick the best engine in its class for the last five years. J.D. Powers recognized Buick City as the best quality assembly plant in the world. Nonetheless, GM is closing it and moving production to China.

In the engineering section where Dean is employed the work will be moved to the Milford Proving Grounds just 35 miles from Flint. But 96 transfers will not be accepted there because salary does the work at Milford. Instead they will accept transfers at Detroit Diesel in Romulus which is 85 miles from Flint and where none of their work went. Dean claims that salary also does the work at Detroit Diesel. The corporation is playing games with peoples lives. He concluded his remarks by saying, "We know we cannot trust GM and jointness doesn't work without trust. I believe we need to follow the lead of the Canadian Auto Workers and create what they call "a culture of struggle". I believe we need to disengage from the UAW culture of cooperation that has failed to save jobs."

We adjourned for the day.

## After Hours

The Cooperative Caucus wines, dines, and dances the delegates every night. I imagine it's hard to remember where you came from when you're gazing down at Detroit from the top floor of a swank hotel with a free drink in your hand. Karl Marx said religion was the opium of the masses.

I always thought religion was rather hard. I wonder what Marx would have thought of the Cooperative Caucus. Free food, drinks, and a chance for an appointment in Solidarity Heaven beats the hell out of religion for mind numbingness. I didn't go.

Instead I drifted down to the back room of an old bar on Fort St. where New Directions, Independents, and other assorted dissidents gathered. I liked it. It was humble. It was real. I've always been attracted to people with bad attitudes and passionate convictions. I felt right at home.

Robert Bohm from the National Writers Union fought me for the last word. He might have won. It's hard to call the winner in a brawl like that. But either way I sharpened my wits and went back to my room determined to come out fighting tomorrow.  
to be continued....

In Solidarity,

Gregg Shotwell  
UAW Local 2151