

Live Bait & Ammo #13

The folks in River City didn't believe they had a problem until the Music Man, a "spell binding symbol salesman" came to town and convinced them there was "Trouble in River City." Of course the Music Man had a solution. He called it the "think (lean) system" and it worked, he told his co-conspirator, "at least long enough for me to collect and leave."

If you listen long enough to the Music Man's tune, you'll buy into his system. If you keep your eyes on the conductor's wand, he'll hypnotize you into ignoring what's going on. You'll be mesmerized by the song and refuse to acknowledge the dissolution that surrounds you.

Machines are leaving River City. Jobs are leaving River City. Outsourcing has replaced insourcing. Tasks multiply and classifications dissolve. Speed-ups accelerate without time studies. Manipulation charades as employee involvement. Capitulation parades in cooperative uniformity under the banner of company/unionism. Job insecurity is designed into the system to strop the competitive edge. Pizza replaces bonuses.

Human Resource managers treat their customers (that's us!) like slaves. The main motivational tools are fear and anxiety. It's management by continuous stress not continuous improvement. When they want more production they whip the horses. It feels like hell and the wisdom in our gut says it won't work for us, but the Music Man sings "Trust me, trust me."

Trust is based on history not blarney, and history hums a different tune. In 1992 the UAW represented 44% of Delphi workers. Today the UAW represents 23% of Delphi workers and the numbers are dropping rapidly as UAW members bail out in a flurry of early retirements and hasty transfers. At this rate the UAW won't need to negotiate a new contract in four years. There won't be any UAW members left in Delphi.

The Music Man's torch song is "Grow the Business", but no new business is growing in this country. Delphi's primary target for investment is Mexico and not because of the market for sales. Production in Mexico is designated for export to the US market. In 1993 there were 542 jobs in the maquiladora sector of Mexico. That figure catapulted to 1,008,031 in 1998. Delphi is the largest private employer in Mexico. Delphi has twice as many workers in Mexico than UAW members in the US. Delphi's North American suppliers are feeling the pinch too.

In 1997 Delphi spent 37 million dollars on Mexican suppliers. In 1998 that figure jumped to 182 million dollars, a 390% increase in one year. Delphi is creating empty floor space all over America.

Uncle Runkle, the president of Delphi E, declined to visit our humble plant in Coopersville, Mi., but he hosted the dedication of Delphi's newest and largest Technical Center in Juarez, Mexico. You heard me right, Juarez, Mexico not Troy, Michigan.

Recently we were forced to watch a promo video for Delphi style lean that featured a speech by the pseudo intellectual geek that penned The Machine That Changed The World. This shyster spent five million dollars on a five year study of lean manufacturing and never once asked a worker on the line what he or she thought. Sound familiar?

Now Delphi pays the schlockmeister to shill for their tent sale and what does he see? Lo and behold, a glorious future! I'd like to hear what he would have thought after spending five years on the assembly line at Nummi. I'd like to strap his academic behind to a screw machine.

Terry Couchre, a twenty-eight year veteran at Delphi Flint East, has a different story. "Jobs are leaving everyday and no new business is coming in. It looks like a rummage sale. Companies are grabbing whatever they want and running out the door. Spark plugs, the backbone of our plant, are going to Mexico. Modular tank production which was developed just five years ago and was supposed to be our future is being outsourced to job shops and the small car line is sold to Mexico. Every time we meet the goals, Delphi resets the goals. The Pedal Module Cell started with fourteen workers. Now seven workers slave like dogs to make the rate set by fourteen. But it's still not enough. They yanked the carrot away again. Pedal Module has been sold to Williamston Controls, a non union company in Dearborn. And Pedal Module came with the slogan 'We Are Growing The Business.' The truth is we just develop the business for someone else. Now they want to contract out the crib attendants."

Shops that have adopted the Delphi Manufacturing System are reporting dramatic spikes in the number of cumulative trauma disorders. Mark Danjin, a committeeman from Delphi Saginaw said, "We just got a big award for being the best example of lean." But what's the reward?

"In the last year the number of cumulative trauma disorders has doubled", Mark said. "We went from 100 members on sick leave to 200. Our people are ruining their bodies in their later years just to make retirement, but in doing so they sacrifice their quality of life in retirement." Delphi's concern for the health and safety of union members is focus phony. So many workers in Dayton wear arm bands they call them "Delphi Bands of Courage." Continuous injury is the DMS version of continuous improvement.

While the Music Man croons his catchy refrain to "Growing the Business" acres of empty floor space open up all over the country. From Rochester, New York to Athens, Alabama the song is the same and so is the reaction. The audience is walking out in droves. UAW members opt for retirement or transfer in a vote of no confidence.

James Arvin, a skilled tradesman in Adrian, Mi. reports that so many people have retired "We've actually hired permanent replacements because we are so short of employees, but no one tells them we will soon be downsized. We have roughly 1200 workers now and at a meeting with the plant manager he said that we will be down to 500 to 600 people." Production workers are transferring back to GM as fast as seniority permits but skilled trades have been prevented from leaving unless they transfer to a skilled trade opening. Delphi must have worked out a deal with GM because trades have been effectively frozen.

The Music Man serenades us with dreamy arias about his longing to "Triple the Business." No mountain is too high, no river is too wide, and no niche in the market is too small for his predatory taste. In Coopersville, Mi. we make fuel injectors. The Music Man belts out a foot stomper on the potential of the after market for fuel injectors, but I don't know anyone who's ever had to replace a fuel injector. He trills and warbles about small engines. He claims we're going to put fuel injectors on lawn mowers for god's sake. But when we asked about Direct Injection Technology for which Delphi received a three million dollar research grant from the Department of Energy because it's the next new thing to save fuel and reduce emissions, he pooh-poohed it as too small and insignificant.

That's funny. Delphi's web site reports that according to William S. Warren, director of engineering, "The technology would be applicable for all sizes of passenger cars, as well as light-duty trucks and sport-utility vehicles." Furthermore Jean J. Botti, technical director of Delphi Energy's Customer Solution Center said he "expects that the products would be commercially viable in three years." Too bad we won't be filling that niche in the market.

Delta Consulting Group Inc., New York advises the spin-off meisters to "Energize people about the start-up while capitalizing on opportunities for downsizing." The Music Man is so eager to follow their advice he breaks into scatological improvisational riffs that sound splendid but have no basis in fact.

For instance, he told us that our competitor, Seimans, "is good at winning new business but poor at maintaining good relationships with their customers." The truth is in 1998 GM gave Seimans a Supplier of the Year Award for excellence in the area of advanced design, development, and supply for Engine Management Systems.

Seimans has won the award nearly a dozen times. Who writes the Music Man's material? Tiny Tim? I think we should downsize the Music Man and replace him with a rental lip syncer before he has us all whistling TipToe Through The Tulips.

The International UAW appears indifferent to our dilemma. The porkchoppers are well insulated. The outsourcing to non-union job shops proceeds pell-mell without any interference from the Cooperative Caucus. "Union officials are running herd for the company", Terry Couchre said. "They'll give managers anything they want." But all they give dues paying members is weak excuses and a bad taste in the mouth.

Uncle Runkle wasn't the only no-show at the UAW/Delphi E Divisional Quality Leadership Council on July 27 in Coopersville. Neither George Andros, our Regional Director, nor Don Oetman, our assistant director, nor Dan Baldwin, our Servicing Rep, showed up at the diagonal slice meeting. In keeping with the practice of ignoring the membership, the UAW International Reps skipped out early and kept their opinions and whatever info they had to themselves. A major ingredient was missing from that slice of American Pie, namely, the UAW.

How should we interpret the abandonment? Is it respectful? Does this behavior show positive regard for the union members on the shop floor? Is it consistent with good union principles? Would a democratically elected representative ignore his or her constituency?

At the Bargaining Convention President Yokich said in reference to the Delphi spin-off, "I thought someone should take a stand and I took a stand early." I? What happened to the WE of unionism?

Is the new UAW about I instead of We? Don Thomas a New Directions Co-Chair from Rochester, NY., says, "The rank and file doesn't have any skin in the game. The Cooperative Caucus has snatched the game out of our hands." But we're the ones who stand to lose our skins, not the good old boys in the Cooperative Caucus. We can certainly see where that solitary stand by Mr. "I" got us: spun-off, strung-up, and stranded. The power of a union isn't spelled solitary, it's spelled SOLIDARITY.

The Cleveland Plain Dealer reports that high ranking union officials from IAM and USW "cited failed merger talks with the UAW over corruption in the UAW, refusal of the UAW to adopt one person, one vote to make the union leadership accountable to the membership...." Could it be that the UAW's failure to organize is their own damn fault?

At the Bargaining Convention President "Secret Strategy" told us he wouldn't negotiate in the press but if we had questions about strategy or the progress of negotiations we should call our Servicing Rep.

I encourage everyone to call their Servicing Rep. Tell him what you see happening: job reduction, speed-up, outsourcing, and a calculated disdain for the union. Tell your Servicing Rep that two tier wages will tear our union apart and we won't stand for it. Tell him we want portable pensions that travel with us, carry over, and guarantee 30 and out no matter how many different shops we worked at, or how long we were laid off. Tell him we want COLA on pensions just like him.

Tell him we want to make outsourcing a strike-able issue. Tell him we want a National Pattern Agreement for all Parts Plants and we want Parity with Assembly Plants not Prevailing Wage. Tell him we want to stick together. Tell him we don't want the National Agreement settled before all Local Agreements are settled.

Tell him we want to fight for job security at the National level in solidarity. Tell him we don't want to pass on the legacy of reduced wages and benefits, and deteriorated working conditions. Tell him we want to pass on the legacy of a proud union that fought hard for the future of the next generation.

If he gives you any crap, tell him you won't vote for him next time.

Then listen to him laugh. Listen hard.

In Solidarity,

UAW Local 2151