

Live Bait & Ammo #31

After reading Live Bait & Ammo, a union brother from England wrote to me: What exactly is a porkchopper? I think we have some of them over here, too.

The meaning is simple enough to decipher, but the origin of any slang is difficult to pinpoint. I believe the term originated with lumberjacks who survived on grits and gruel and mule droppings while their union agent dined on porkchops. I am sure there are porkchoppers wherever there are union members to represent.

To paraphrase Tom Paine, a union is a blessing, but a union bureaucracy even in its best state, is but a necessary evil.

I originally wrote Live Bait & Ammo as a response to censorship in my local union. Since then it has taken on a life of its own. Now I get emails from people I don't know. From time to time a worker from a foreign transplant will send an email asking what I think of the UAW as there is an organizing drive at their plant. Invariably, I tell them that I am pro union, not for the money, the benefits, or the SUB pay; I am pro union for the sake of dignity, equality, and democracy.

There is no respect for workers' rights without a union. When a non union worker punches the time clock, he or she punches out the Bill of Rights. As a union member I have more rights when I punch in. I can criticize the boss and not get fired. Try that at Nissan.

The right to express my opinion about union policies and leaders is protected by the UAW Constitution and federal labor law. I have the freedom to write, distribute literature in my plant, and associate with other union members in an effort to challenge company or union policies. Non union workers do not have freedom of speech or association.

On the other hand, when non union workers question me about democracy in the UAW, I don't know how to explain the one party state without making it sound totalitarian. Americans have a gut feeling about one person/one vote. They would be shocked to go to the polls and find out they didn't have any choice. No choice is no democracy. No democracy means no accountability, and no accountability makes porkchoppers.

In the UAW we have democracy at the local level, but at the International level we are controlled by a one party state. What should we call this system? Theocracy, as in there is no god but the Gettelfinger? Oligarchy, as in we will select the best leaders for you? Autocracy, as in automatic acclamation? Or Nepotism, as in family members first, then those you've slept with?

The Administration Caucus controls all appointments in the UAW. As a result of this patronage system the Ad. Caucus has many followers, but few leaders. An independent person who might challenge the hierarchy will never be appointed. No one in the International is elected. Like their corporate counterparts, they are selected, then rubber stamped by proxies, I mean, delegates.

The Ad.Caucus has so deftly woven the bunting of the caucus with the official union emblem there is little distinction between them. But the bureaucracy is not the union; the members are the union. Dissent is not anti union; dissent is the measure of democracy in a union. We the people are the union.

A follower of the Ad. Caucus accused me of having my own agenda; a good laugh considering the mouthpiece. My campaign for delegate included a WANTED poster replete with mug shots ready for framing, defacing, or target practice. I never claimed to be an in-law. At least you can be certain an appointment is not on my agenda. I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense, Tom Paine once wrote. Then, he urged readers to determine for themselves.

The 33rd Constitutional Con

At the 33rd Constitutional Convention delegates constitutionally defined as the highest tribunal in the UAW were treated like a captive audience for assorted politicians, dignitaries, preachers, and ceremonial masters of hype. God bless them, they were all commendable speakers, but I came to hear delegates from the rank and file. In a one party state it's imperative that the opposition is heard, that questions are asked, and accountability demanded.

Delegates are a direct conduit from the shop floor to the top floor of the union. Leaders need to listen in order to lead with genuine authority. Instead, the

majority of time was spent boring us into submission. Five or six non UAW speakers addressed the convention each day, some by video. The role of delegate was subjugated by an onslaught of oratory that left little time for genuine debate.

It's my intent to give the minority report, to speak for the underdog, to ask probing questions, and challenge the status quo. That is my agenda. I don't begrudge the opinion, My union right or wrong. I just think it is dull, dependent, and democratically naive. The union is not a Glee Club. UAW members read the official story every month in Solidarity, where all UAW news is good, all opinions are politically correct, and all union reps are sober. Enough.

Build a Better Union

Yokich kicked off the convention with a state of the union speech. I have my differences with Brother Steve, but I get a kick out of the way he talks. He gives a speech like a pit bull on a short leash. A lot of us had high hopes when he took office that he would walk the talk. But here we are, seven years later, diminished in numbers, expectations, and hope.

Despite improvement in organizing, overall membership in the manufacturing sector of the UAW is down. Yokich cited 35,000 new members in manufacturing over the last four years, [the official President's Report cited 18,000 in the all-important auto parts industry.] but the question that remains unanswered is: how many of those jobs were originally outsourced from higher paying Big Three plants?

He described examples in which Ford exerted pressure on suppliers to be neutral in organizing drives. If a union goes hat in hand to a corporation for help in organizing, what's the payoff? No resistance to outsourcing? New members organized at half the wages? A spin off? Who needs a union to do that?

Yokich talked about the UAW's record of progressive social action. What social movement would be against one member/one vote, or Mental Health Parity? He bragged of how the UAW denounced oil drilling in Alaska, but didn't mention the UAW's resistance to fuel efficiency standards that would protect the environment.

Yokich said, Those bastards in congress deserve my friend, Warren Davis. Well, somebody deserves the bastard, but more of that later. He said we did something behind the scenes to help free imprisoned dissidents in Indonesia. He didn't mention that he also worked behind the scenes to repress dissent in the UAW. He said some UAW members were upset with him because he spoke out against the NRA. He said, those types of lobbies are anti worker.

Then he remonstrated, Yet you are going to have members in your plant or work site who speak out against you, if you speak out. Damn, we don't need those kind of members. We don't need them. We need to talk for all of society, not just a small portion of it. We need to be a real union. Talk for brothers and sisters who need our help.

If we don't need members who speak out against you if you speak out, we could eliminate the entire Administration Caucus. If we need to be a real union, we could start by respecting different points of view including the NRA, and assisting locked out brothers and sisters who need our help at Local 2036 in Henderson, Kentucky.

Some surmise that Brother Steve's desire for gun control was driven by his fear of the firing squad.

Yokich said, Every generation has an obligation. Your obligation is to build a better union. Amen, brother.

Until the Outhouse Blooms Roses

The first resolution opened for debate was Organizing. I was one of the first to speak.

If you stood on the roof of Solidarity House and looked out across the city of Detroit, you would see that UAW headquarters is surrounded by non union Independent Parts Suppliers. The Big Three have talked partnership while aggressively divesting themselves of parts suppliers in order to whipsaw locals and undermine the UAW's bargaining leverage.

In 1999 GM spun off Delphi. Ford followed with Visteon. Do members at Powertrain and Stamping plants feel protected? The pattern is clear. You're next.

Modular Assembly is the organizing challenge of the 21st century. We can't put our heads in the sand and say I don't want to hear that word. Modular Assembly won't go away and the divestment of parts suppliers, the outsourcing and sub contracting won't go away. We must confront the challenge head on.

There are more autoworkers in IPS today than there were in 1978, but 80% are unorganized. Why have we failed? We need to take an honest look at ourselves and stop making excuses. Was it easier to organize in the 30's?

Was it easy when Walter Reuther got his head busted open at the Battle of the Overpass? Was it easy when he took a double barrel shotgun blast in the back? Was it easy when Victor Reuther was shot in the face and blinded in one eye?

Was it easy to organize the occupation of a GM plant in Flint? Was it easy for John L. Lewis to tell the Governor of Michigan that if he sent in the National Guard to oust sit down strikers the militia will have the pleasure of shooting me, too?

It has never been easy.

It has never been fair.

The bosses have never been nice. We can talk partnership until the outhouse blooms roses, but it won't change the stink of the bastards in charge of our livelihoods.

Samuel Gompers once said that unions need to provide a practical solution to an urgent need. What do IPS workers need urgently? Fair pay, comprehensive health care, secure pensions, job security. If we want to organize, we must strive to meet those needs.

The 33rd Constitutional Convention should set a goal to establish a National Pattern Contract for IPS just like the Teamsters have.

If we allow the bosses to divide us, isolate us, and treat each local unit as a separate entity, they will continue to chew us up and spit us out. We can't confront

a Multi National Corporation or a supplier to a Multi National Corporation with small isolated local strikes.

We need a national pattern agreement and an industry wide strike about basic issues like wages, health care, and pension security that will strike a nerve in a broad cross section of the working class and galvanize public support. An industry wide strike has the potential to place the UAW at the forefront of a social movement to put the health and well being of the working class ahead of the bossing class.

To that end I propose that we provide a practical solution to an urgent need by establishing;

(1) a National Pattern Contract

(2) with a National Benefits Fund pooled industry wide and administered by a joint union and industry committee to cover pensions, health care, and sub pay for all of IPS. Small suppliers like Mexican Industries in Detroit lack the capital accumulation to provide adequate benefits like those enjoyed by workers in the Big Three. A National Benefits Fund would enable small IPS plants to afford better benefits at reduced premiums and therefore make them more competitive.

(3) Furthermore, pension credits must be portable and cover all UAW members in separate IPS units under the National Pattern Agreement. Thereby ensuring security in a volatile industry.

(4) Furthermore, UAW members in IPS should have preferential hiring and transfer rights to other companies represented by the UAW. Thus meeting the needs of IPS workers for job security and providing a practical incentive to join the UAW.

At this point Yokich cut me off.

"Brother conclude, your time is up."

"30 seconds."

"Nope. Your time is up. Conclude."

"I need"

"I know you. You know, I read your emails pretty regular. [He must have meant Live Bait & Ammo because I don't send him email.] I know you very well. Would you finish your speech? But I'm going to give you about 30 seconds. Conclude quickly."

Imagine....

"You're done Brother. Shut off the mic. Let me just say one thing, I'm from the IPS. My local is one of the largest IPS locals of a hundred plants; of 200 it's probably the biggest. We've been fighting this fight for day and night and I can tell you sitting right here why it hurts to see what they've been doing and how they still....

His words trailed off into an unintelligible slur. Whatever he said, I felt it was an honor to be on his blacklist.

Yokich didn't counter with one new idea. The Ad. Caucus strategy is to ask their corporate partners to pressure suppliers to whom they have outsourced our jobs to be neutral during organizing drives.

I tried to conclude but the mic was dead. I wanted to say: Imagine Bob King's chances for success if he could go to a group of non union IPS workers and say, 'Do you want higher wages? Do you want health care without premiums? Do you want pension security? Do you want job security? Then join a union with a VISION. Join a union with balls the size of truck wheels. Join the UAW.

A short time later, Craig Noffbagel, the president of Local 22, got up and said we shouldn't criticize the administration and kizazz kizazz kizazz.

If you lobotomize critical intelligence from a social animal, all you have left is an animal whose only conviction is a passionate intensity to follow the herd. A convention without critical opposition would be as reassuring as church. We

wouldn't have to think for ourselves. All we would have to do is believe. Trouble for me was, the guy in the pulpit was a sottish, stupid, brutish man with a pug's command of the English language. He spit out words as if they tasted foul.

I swear allegiance to my independence and to the integrity for which it stands, one person, underdog, with liberty, justice, and truth for all.

To be continued.....

In Solidarity,

UAW Local 2151