

Live Bait & Ammo #30

In February 1998 Billy Robinson, the president of Local 2036, in Henderson, Kentucky called Ron Gettlefinger for advice. At that time Gettlefinger was the UAW Region 3 Director. Billy explained that negotiations at Accuride were stalled. Gettlefinger said, Take 'em out.

Forty days later members of Local 2036 voted to reject the contract for a second time, but also to return to work unconditionally. In response, Accuride locked them out. It was apparent that Accuride was not interested in bargaining. Accuride intended to bust the union.

In June 1998 Gettlefinger ascended to International Vice-President in charge of Ford. From that lofty perch he began to display all the social movement of a chicken crossing the road.

First, he supported the strike and made a commitment to stand behind them for as long as it takes. Then, he concurred with the International Executive Board to cut off strike benefits. Then, he agreed to put the Local under administratorship. Then, at the hearing, he pretended not to know anything about the Local, or Accuride.

Well, maybe he wasn't pretending. Then, he agreed to restore strike benefits at twice the normal rate. Then, he agreed to cut benefits, for a second time. Then, he agreed to pull the local union charter, if they didn't ratify. On March 28, 2002 the UAW International sent a letter to Accuride stating, The International Union and its Local 2036 hereby disclaim interest in representing hourly employees at Accuride's Henderson, Kentucky facility.

Nobody from the International bothered telling the locked out UAW members of Local 2036 anything, not even so much as 'Good riddance'. Looking back, one has to wonder, just what the Fickle Finger meant when he said, Take 'em out.

In the US there are more jobs in the Independent Parts Supply sector today than there were in 1979 when membership in the UAW peaked at one and a half million. Profits, as well as jobs, are up in IPS. But wages are down. The problem is de-unionization. And the trend is rolling like a runaway Freightliner.

The dismemberment of the unionized parts sector has enabled the Big Three to drive costs down and profits up. It appears that the survival of an elite corps of high paid laborers in assembly plants has been secured at the expense of Independent Parts Supply workers. The demise of Local 2036 when seen through the wide angle lens of historical perspective is significant to auto workers everywhere. IPS locals are sacrificed to spare, or postpone, the showdown at the Big Three Cartel.

Accuride is not a small job shop. Accuride supplies steel truck wheels for GM, Ford, Navistar, Freightliner, Mack, Peterbilt, Volvo -- all of them partners, as they say, with the new UAW. As Accuride proceeded to bust the union, the Rollover Caucus covered their butts with a thong, exerting only the flimsiest of efforts to fulfill the bare minimum of their duty to represent. Local 2036 is not an isolated case.

The Big Three haven't completed their divestment of parts suppliers, but the pattern is clear; powertrain and stamping plants are next in line. Modular assembly is not simply about economy or efficiency. It's about control. Modular Assembly divides and isolates unions, whipsaws locals in a tail spinning dive to the bottom of the competitive pit, and bitch-slaps the office rats who call themselves International Reps into mild mannered house pets.

The UAW treats these battles such as Accuride, or the '98 strikes at Metal Fab and Delphi in Flint, as isolated, local strikes. The International has failed to develop a unified campaign to combat directly these threats to solidarity, these cracks in the foundation of our united front. While the Rollover Caucus seeks neutrality agreements and partnerships with management, multinationals are picking us off, one at a time.

The office rats at Solidarity House are too far detached from the shop floor to mobilize a broad ranged, solidarity campaign that would threaten the balance of power and send a clear message to union members, community organizers, social activists, politicians, and employers:

No Justice = No Production = No Peace = No Profit

Solidarity is not negotiable. All unions need to unite behind a single banner and put CEOs on notice that every local dispute against an anti union company will quickly ignite into a national conflagration: no exceptions, no excuses, no concessions. We will fight back.

But the sad fact is: office rats in the machine, steel, and auto worker unions were too concerned about protecting their own soft turf to unite the three separate fiefdoms into one big union. The office rats have forgotten that civil disobedience, not meek compliance, built the labor movement. The office rats form partnerships with private corporations while they compete with each other for public sector employees at the expense of union members and unorganized workers at Independent Parts Suppliers.

The New York Times reported that auto analysts have said: Mr. Gettelfinger will face pressure to ease contract terms at Delphi Automotive Systems and Visteon, the largest United States parts makers, to keep jobs in the country. The new president "is going to have to do some things that are very unpopular." U.A.W. officials "are going to have to address the question whether they can sustain the same level of pay and benefits in parts plants."

Ron Gettelfinger, the next president of the UAW, responded with an announcement from Henderson, Kentucky disclaiming any interest in representing hourly employees at Accuride.

It's Open Season on IPS workers. No license required. No restrictions. No limit.

The UAW International has shown a pattern of rolling over at IPS. Will they seek Big Three pattern agreements for Delphi, Visteon, American Axle, and other IPS plants? Or will they extend the pattern of low wages and de-unionization in IPS that protects auto workers in the Big Three and postpones the inevitable showdown?

In '98 GM threatened the UAW with a lawsuit over the strikes at Metal Fab and Delphi in Flint. The dispute was settled in a back room deal and the lawsuit was dropped. After seven long weeks the locals gained nothing, not one job. The following week, Delphi was spun off from GM. The following year, Ford dispensed with its parts supplier, Visteon.

Accuride is a smoking gun.

Why did Gettlefinger rollover?

It's a rhetorical question, just like, Why did the chicken cross the road?

You already know the answer.

In Solidarity,

UAW Local 2151