

Live Bait & Ammo #1

--Convention Report--

When my name came up for nomination as a convention delegate, I let it lay. All I have to lose I thought is a bad reputation. When my name came up on the top of the ballot list, I thought, Luck is a Lady with a bad reputation for sudden unforeseen changes. The Lady's smile made me uncomfortable.

I'm not a politician. I'm not a gambler. What would I do at a convention in casino land? I didn't trust the deal, to tell you the truth, but it was too late to walk away. So I did the next best thing. I didn't campaign. No cards. No toothy grins. No glad to see you vote for me-me sweaty handshakes. And no way will I pay my own way promises. When I won the election I figured there was only one reason. A bunch of people wanted to hear a real story and not some slavering, trumped up B.S.

I've decided to distribute an independent report because I'm tired of fighting censorship. I won't kick that dead horse again. I've consulted with the NLRB. Federal law protects the right to distribute printed material about union matters in non-work areas during non-work times. Dissidents have rights in this country.

I am not anti UAW. My views coincide with traditional union values. I'm proud to be a union member. I promote the Labor Movement wherever I go. I'm not asking for agreement or support or votes. I want the opportunity to assert freedom of speech. I want to open discussion on ideas, issues, and policies that affect union members. I want a forum for the critical evaluation of decisions made for us by people in power.

Democracy and the delegate system cannot function without open discussion and free choice. Censorship, repression, coercion, and the withholding of information cannot defeat an idea with merit. The only effective way to combat an idea you don't like is with a better idea. At the dinner reception honoring Victor Reuther, Brother Yokich asserted the right to disagree. Then he said, "I can hold my own." Well, I can hold my own too.

I will not dish dirt or attack personalities. Some may disagree, some may be offended, but the only alternative to B.S. is truth and it's not always pleasant or pretty. I am determined to provoke debate and provide a different perspective.

Last spring I didn't know anything about the convention system. Like most of you I had questions but few answers. The first question on everyone's mind was, "Why Vegas?" The second question was, "What will they do there?" Your guess was as good as mine. I took a wait and see attitude.

In the mean time I wrote an article about lean manufacturing entitled, "What Would Woody Say?" but the people who control The Perspective, our local union paper, didn't approve. What's new? I sent it to the Underground Autoworker. Ben agreed to print it. It's due out in October. The Underground Autoworker is now available at Argos books in Grand Rapids.

The deadline for resolutions to the convention was May 29, 1998. There was no announcement in our local. We were uniformly uninformed. In a spirit of inactivism the deadline came and went. Not a single resolution was submitted to the convention by Local

2151. Like all good children we were seen and not heard. Is this a plan, an agenda, a strategy?

As the convention date approached I expected information, education, and direction. Our local union president gave me a packet of information about all the shows that would be in Las Vegas that week. Other than that neither the Local, the Regional, nor the International, gave me any idea what I was supposed to do or what to expect.

I did receive the minutes of an International Executive Board meeting. I read it in less than five minutes. Twice. I wondered what they did for the rest of the hour. I visualized Yokich, Shoemaker, Laskowski, et al, lined up at the time clock shooting the shit about the Red Wings and whining about the slowness of time when you're waiting to punch out. Life at the top isn't so different, just more relaxed.

As the convention drew nearer I realized nobody was going to tell me anything. It reminded me of Kindergarten. My mother didn't warn me before she dropped me off at Madison Park Elementary that I would be the only white kid. I had the distinct impression that I was going to be the outsider, the scrawny little white guy, again. Only this time I was mentally prepared. What my mother didn't teach me, my African American friends did.

The UAW is controlled by the Administrative Caucus, a political faction with no competition other than the fledgling New Directions, a notorious group of rabble rousers spearheaded by Victor Reuther.

Since the Administrative Caucus showed no inclination to educate me, I called New Directions. They sent me a video tape and the transcripts of the last convention. I watched Owen Bieber and Steve Yokich address the convention. I saw resolutions read and motions made. I watched the convention in operation. I got the flavor. For the first time I caught a sense of excitement. This was a big event, an historic moment, and I had a responsibility. New Directions provided me with the information I needed, but they never told me how to vote. They respected my independent mind.

The week before the convention commenced, I received a t-shirt and a nylon jacket (the same color as the Delphi ISO9000 jackets) with Region1-D and George Andros' name printed on them. I assumed this was part of the regalia, the pomp part of the circumstance that I would have to abide until my duties were dispensed.

I was informed by Jim Huizenga that acceptance of the uniform meant that I would vote for George Andros and support the Administrative Caucus platform. I felt insulted, disrespected, demeaned, and coerced. I was elected by people who believed I could think for myself, I could speak my own mind, and I would not be intimidated by authority or peer pressure. I wasn't elected by people who had the impression that I was a yes man.

The proposition was preposterous, not to mention cheap. No one was running against George Andros. There was no one else to vote for. All twelve Regional Directors and every seat on the executive board were uncontested.

The delegate system of representation is a democratic structure, but we have no real choice. The election of officers was the biggest dog and pony show in Vegas.

There are many intelligent, competent, and ambitious leaders in the UAW. Why didn't anyone throw their hat in the ring? Elections at the international level rarely involve choices. The Ad. Caucus selects international officers and regional directors.

Traditionally, the assistant regional director moves up when there is an opening. When Bob Lent, the director in Region 1 retired, Leon Matthews, his assistant, naturally assumed he would replace Lent as director. But Steve Yokich intervened and selected Nate Gooden. The June issue of LABOR NOTES reported: "According to some officials in the region, Yokich strong-armed local officers and convention delegates to back Gooden. Some say that Yokich threatened to have work moved from Local's plants if their delegates supported Matthews." Nate Gooden was unopposed at the convention in Las Vegas.

Perhaps this incident induced Fred Willibanks from Region 1-C in Flint to withhold the announcement of his intention to run against Reuben Burkes for Secretary Treasurer until the convention.

I met Fred Willibanks. He was determined to run for election. He was an independent candidate. He spoke openly about his commitment to union values and Christianity. At the last minute he declined the nomination without any explanation. I thought it was out of character, but I respect Mr. Willibanks. I'm sure he had his reasons.

At the August membership meeting when Doug Copeland gave his report, he mentioned that Fred Willibanks declined the nomination. Doug said he wished he could have heard what Willibanks had to say. Fred Willibanks did speak to the convention after he declined the nomination. He said: "I thank God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit for the strength to stand before you today."

He expressed support for the strikers in Flint and concern that any settlement include new work for Buick City which is slated to be closed. He stated that his platform included, "One member, one vote; settling local contracts before a national agreement is signed; and full retiree voting rights in the unification."

He said that he used every opportunity to publicly express what a great union the UAW was. He said we should "Work to improve the union. Improvements we need to make in the workplace are the same improvements we need to make in the International Union." He said that he declined the nomination with, "the best interests of the convention in mind." He did not elaborate.

In the June issue of our local union paper, The Perspective, Jim Huizenga reprinted the official Administrative Caucus position on their political opponents, New Directions. First of all, it is a violation of federal law to use union funds to promote a political campaign. This violation was particularly blatant as it was published three weeks before the convention.

That aside, the report revealed that any "appointed staff member who challenges an incumbent member of the IEB take a leave of absence 90 days prior to the election." Seems fair to the Ad. Caucus that any challenger with half a chance be deprived of income for three months.

The Ad. Caucus article criticized Jerry Tucker for filing a complaint with the Department of Labor after "narrowly losing the election for Region 5 Director."

The article did not mention how narrowly. Tucker lost by two/tenths of one vote. Nor did the article mention the election violations that the subsequent investigation uncovered. I quote from the book, TAKING ON GENERAL MOTORS, by the author Eric Mann, a former UAW member who was not a member of New Directions. ..."several delegates who had voted for Worley had never been properly elected in their locals; two delegates who had voted for Worley received payments of approximately \$5,000 in UAW funds; and Jerry Tucker, after fourteen years on the staff of the International union, had been fired from his position as assistant regional director four days after he announced his candidacy."

The Ad. Caucus blamed Tucker for wasting the members' dues money, but a little honesty on the part of the Administrative Caucus would have saved not only our money but our integrity as a democratic institution. There's a lot of democracy in the UAW at the local level, but at the Regional and International levels of the UAW the Ad. Caucus, the ruling party, has effectively throttled any opposition.

One party democracy is a sham. Nothing underscores the need for a one member, one vote system than the absurdity of going through the motions of an election when there is no choice and the outcome is preordained. This wasn't a convention of democratic trade unionists, it was a stock holders meeting.

We were called to Las Vegas to give our consent to the handpicked board of directors, not cast our vote. The UAW is run like a corporation from the top down. That's not the way it was meant to be. One member, one vote is not a radical idea, it is fundamental to every notion of democracy Americans have ever held.

I took the jacket and the shirt but I didn't relinquish my right to follow my conscience or speak my mind. As Tom Paine once said, "Let them call me rebel and welcome, I feel no concern from it; but I should suffer the misery of devils, were I to make a whore of my soul..." I'll gladly return the t-shirt and the jacket if George demands it, but I'd like to see a receipt. I want to know who pays for all this stuff. Don't you?

...to be continued...

Fraternally,
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