

Live Bait & Ammo #120: Our Fates are Hand and Fist

The exposure of mismanagement, incompetence, and fraud in financial markets coupled with a domestic auto industry caught driving the wrong way down a one way street leads the corporate elite to one inevitable conclusion: it's the union's fault.

In their opinion the UAW's success in achieving middle class standards for their members, and pensions and health care for their retirees is a malignant curse on free market capitalism. In both Houses of Congress the companies were portrayed as hostages and hard earned union benefits as ransom.

The judgment is instructive. You don't have to be an immigrant to be labeled an outlaw in America. All you have to do is work for a living.

Republicans want to break the union. Democrats want to keep the unions corralled. When Clinton and the Democrats controlled Congress we didn't win anti striker replacement laws, we won NAFTA. Both parties worked to open US markets to Chinese imports. The decline of manufacturing in the US was neither accidental nor evolutionary, it was national industrial policy. While other countries subsidized Research & Development and erected protective trade barriers, our government greased the outsourcing skids.

The Detroit Three asked Congress for a loan as opposed to a no strings attached gift to slide them through the credit squeeze. In exchange, Congress demanded the companies shutter factories and lay off tens of thousands of workers. Snake oil for an economy running on empty.

Congress set up transplants like Honda and Toyota as benchmarks for concessions from the UAW. They demanded concessions that would bring union contracts down to non union levels in every aspect except job security. They rejected job security for a good old fashion, free market maxim: the supremacy of property rights over human rights. In America a company is free to dispose of its property, including workers, as it pleases.

During downturns in the market, it pleases Toyota and Honda to pay 100% of wages to workers who do non productive work in the plant or the community or receive training.

Bloomberg News reported on October 8, "Idled Toyota Motor Corp. assembly-line workers in San Antonio are spending two weeks cleaning city parks, removing graffiti, painting benches and fixing fences instead of building pickup trucks." ["Toyota Texas Workers Scrub Graffiti as Factory Idles" By Alan Ohnsman 10/8/08 Bloomberg News]

On December 12, CNN reported, "Honda spokesman Ed Miller said the cuts will take place at five of Honda's seven plants in the U.S. and Canada. Employees at the plants will be given other tasks or can take paid or unpaid vacation time, he said. No layoffs will result from the cuts, he said." ["Honda cuts North American Production Again" MONEY.CNN.COM, 12/12/08]

The Columbus Dispatch reported on December 13, that despite cut backs "employees will have the option to take unpaid leave or vacation, or report to work for non production tasks."

Why?

Because, ".....the idea of layoffs is contrary to the corporate culture at the Japanese companies." ["Honda, GM Slash Production" By Dan Gearino, 12/13/08 Columbus Dispatch]

"The closest precedent might be 1993," reported Dan Gearino, "Amid another economic downturn, when the Marysville plant cut production of the Honda Accord by about 13,000, or 11 percent, according to news reports at the time."

"Then, as now, Honda didn't lay off workers. Instead, it used the extra time for training." ["Honda, GM Slash Production" By Dan Gearino, 12/13/08 Columbus Dispatch]

The UAW was criticized for job security provisions in their contracts that committed the company to either train workers idled by production cuts, or utilize them in a non production capacity in the plant or the community. Congress demanded parity with Japanese transplants except in regard to job security. The idea of job security, or income as a right, is repulsive to American corporations and Congress.

Under pressure from Congress UAW President Ron Gettelfinger agreed to suspend the Job Bank wherein laid-off "employees will remain in the plant or report to a designated location at 100% of their straight time hourly rate" [2007 UAW-GM National Contract- pg. 204].

The union used to promise protection. Now they promise concessions. The union used to practice solidarity. Now they practice rat eat rat.

The idea of JOB Bank was originally introduced to the UAW by GM managers in 1984 as a ruse to persuade workers that boosting productivity would not cost them their jobs. Workers were promised "meaningful work" in exchange for any jobs that were eliminated as a result of cooperative initiatives to produce more with fewer workers. GM got the idea from the Japanese.

"In Japan, there is very much a sense of employer-employee loyalty that goes both ways."
["Honda, GM Slash Production" By Dan Gearino, 12/13/08 Columbus Dispatch]

The difference between the Japanese version and the American version is that Japanese companies retained workers because they planned to expand. American companies, on the other hand, planned to downsize and outsource. Paying workers not to work was GM's post modern version of "planned obsolescence". Workers weren't fired, they were put out to pasture. GM didn't bother training them because the only expansion GM intended was overseas. In the early 1980s, GM had more than 350,00 UAW members. Today it has less than 73,000.

GM doesn't need the JOB Bank anymore. That stage of the plan is over and Congress is being used to strong-arm the union.

Gettelfinger wasted no time doing the henchmen's bidding. He rushed back to Detroit after the first grilling, called for a meeting of Local Union leaders, and informed them that the JOB Bank would be suspended without consultation or consent of the membership. What else Gettelfinger may have promised to deliver for his corporate partners at the expense of active workers, we have yet to discover. We do know that the Con Caucus agreed to delay payments to the VEBA, a trust fund established for retiree health care.

Active and retired members both have skin in the game. Our fates are hand and fist.

National health care is the unifying factor. Take health care off the table and workers are in a much stronger bargaining position. Take health care off the table and retirees won't see their pensions devoured by escalating premiums and copays. Take health care off the table and the two tier generation stands a chance. Fight for universal single payer health care and non union workers may think the union is a social movement worth joining. Universal health care is the one cause for everyone.

Workers' rights are not defined by law or contract. Workers' rights are defined by struggle. You will win what you are willing to fight for. Nothing more.

Join us January 10, 2008 in St. Louis.

SOS, Gregg Shotwell www.soldiersofsolidarity.com www.factoryrat.com

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Thirty-nine state AFL-CIO federations, over 100 Central Labor Councils and 400 local unions have endorsed HR-676, John Conyer's "Expanded and Improved Medicare for All" bill. [www.johnconyers.com/healthcare] The first step is to unite the huge reservoir of support for single payer in thousands of local unions and labor bodies. To take that step, a number of labor federations and unions are planning a national meeting of labor organizations that support HR 676, "Medicare for All," to be held in St. Louis on January 10, 2009.

Labor for Single-Payer Healthcare Meeting
January 10-11, 2009
The Crowne-Plaza - Downtown St. Louis

For additional information> www.laborforsinglepayer.org
or contact Organizing Committee Coordinator Mark Dudzic at 201-314-2653 or mdudzic@igc.org

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