

Live Bait & Ammo #3

--Convention Report--

The first day of the convention was dominated by politicians. I thought the purpose of the convention was to provide democratically elected delegates the opportunity to voice their opinions and express the will of the people. I thought the leadership was there to listen and learn how to serve the membership better.

How vain and foolish of me. We were there to be dictated to. We were seated in orderly rows to provide an audience for the dog and pony show. Giant video screens on each side of the podium magnified the spectacle of power and riveted attention on the bigger than life faces of the speakers. The predominance of politicians, big shots, and media in relation to the delegates' diminished role as captive audience conveyed a cogent message.

(1) We are up here. You are down there.

(2) We talk. You listen.

(3) We rule. You follow.

(4) Solidarity isn't defined by your relationships with each other and the common laborer. Solidarity is defined by unanimous approval of our directives.

President Clinton, the man who shafted us with NAFTA and GATT and attempted to shaft us again with another union gutting whipsawing fast track trade treaty spoke to the convention by video.

His face was blown up so big on the screen I could count the nasal hairs protruding from his nostrils. It wasn't pretty but the audience applauded. Why applaud a video? The video can't hear. The video can't respond. The video isn't real. The video is as fake as everything else in Vegas.

Besides, Clinton is not a friend of labor. Through trade treaties and federal downsizing he is directly responsible for more job cuts than Chainsaw Al Dunlap. He's a shameless liar and betrayer of the Labor Movement. We should have known it the moment he told us he didn't inhale.

The Clinton administration promised to deny federal contracts to companies that obstruct the workers' right to organize a union. Five years ago a majority of workers at Avondale Industries, a shipyard near New Orleans, voted for union representation. Avondale refuses to recognize the union yet continues to be awarded billions of dollars in Navy contracts and millions more in state and federal training grants. The Navy has even picked up the tab for Avondale union busting meetings.

Clinton is a user, a liar, a traitor, a fake. On top of that he doesn't respect women. I'm not dishing dirt here. The truth is as plain as a plate of beans.

The federal government is working relentlessly to bust the postal workers' union. More and more of their work is outsourced and they are denied the right to strike. Why should we cooperate with Clinton? Why should he have a place of honor at our convention? We could have learned more from any randomly selected machine operator. But that is not the message our union leaders wish to convey.

(5) Power doesn't come from the floor. It comes from the podium.

(6) Now sit still and be quiet.

The rest of the day was consumed by long winded resolutions read verbatim in toto by drones. We all nodded out and roused ourselves only when prodded to say "yea" for whatever. These resolutions did not come from the rank and file. These resolutions concerned international trade and policies and blah academic blah written by some geek PHD in a turtleneck on the top floor of Solidarity House on a long winter day.

These resolutions may impress the United Nations General Assembly but they had nothing to do with life on the shop floor as you and I know it. And I'm sure as hell the Irish don't give a damn what the UAW thinks about their Troubles.

No one listened. The monotonous oration went on and on. We were bored into submission. If you don't believe me ask Ron Edwards. He was so bored he was crying. He wanted to go home. I rummaged around in my bag of convention freebies, found what I was looking for, and trimmed my toenails.

When Dick Shoemaker took the podium, I was surprised. I didn't understand how a union leader who dared propose that CAT strikers accept a contract that would sacrifice 50 discharged union members, roll over on 440 unfair labor practice charges, and grant amnesty to line crossers and scabs could hold his head up in front of a labor union convention.

Apparently, in the new UAW an injury to one is not necessarily an injury to all, especially if it isn't ME. It scares me to think that Shoemaker is our chief negotiator. It scares me to think our job security is in his hands. Shoemaker not only lacks the characteristic spit and vinegar of an old fashion union man, he doesn't know how to dress.

At the strike rally in Flint on July, 20 everyone was wearing a union shirt except for the company spies, the narcs, and Dick Shoemaker. Dick was wearing a red Ralph Lauren polo shirt with the little polo guy a stride a horse galloping across his left breast. This overpriced status symbol made of cotton and two buttons is sewn by little girls in Hong Kong. It costs twice as much as the non designer brand but it all pays the same to the seamstress. Don't get me wrong. I'm not criticizing the Shoemaker's taste. I'm criticizing his lack of discretion. A strike rally is not a country club.

The most appalling moment at the convention came when Brother Yokich, referring to the CAT strike said , "Don't let anyone tell you we didn't win that." Then he swung a left hook at a shadow and yelled, "God - - - it!"

I have the highest regard for the loyal members who refused to cross a picket line for six years and who voted down a yellow dog contract that would have sacrificed 50 union members. Those people risked everything. They deserve our respect. They put their life savings on the line. I will never forget them. They are heroes in my book. But the only victory was the victory of the workers' integrity, the victory of principles over compromise.

The same cannot be said of the union leaders who were willing to abandon discharged union members, and give amnesty to line crossers. The leaders that rolled over on 440 unfair labor practice charges. The leaders that flip flopped when their own comfort was threatened by a lawsuit. I will never look at the CAT strikers or the locked out newspaper workers as losers. I respect their courage. I respect their commitment. But to call it a win, cheapens the struggle. I felt embarrassed watching our UAW president make a grandstand play off the backs of the CAT strikers.

The rank and file didn't lose that battle. The rank and file didn't throw in the towel. The rank and file didn't cave in. The leadership did. We deserve an honest evaluation of what went wrong. We need a leader who has the guts to be accountable. Do you think Yokich or Shoemaker would be reelected in a "one member - one vote" democratic election? Not in Peoria.

....to be continued....

Fraternally,

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