

Live Bait & Ammo #2

--Convention Report--

I believe the Labor Movement is a vehicle for positive change in society. I believe unions can be powerful expressions of the will of the people. I believe the UAW is an advocate for the dignity of working people. I attended the convention to observe, to learn, hopefully to participate, and to report back to the membership.

I have come to believe the present system of government within the UAW is pseudo-democratic. The present system discourages participation, impedes the free exchange of ideas, and obstructs access to information. The proof is in the results.

Year after year we have watched our ranks diminish while staffing levels within the UAW expanded. Just as GM has downsized and lost market share and yet grown richer, so has the UAW declined in membership, lost power, and grown fatter. The UAW is big business.

The average UAW member is not actively involved in the union for a good reason. The role of the individual member has been reduced to spectator or at best cheerleader. Members aren't needed for the show to go on and they know it. If you don't have the right to vote in national and regional elections, or you aren't given a valid choice, why bother getting to know the candidates or their policies and platforms?

If negotiations are conducted behind the blank screens of an information blackout, why should one educate oneself about the issues? If my only purpose as a union member is to pay dues, show up at picnics and parades, and vote how and when I am told to do so, why should I get excited?

There are two types of unions: the service model and the organizing model. The UAW has chosen the service model. The service style union turns active members into complacent consumers, loyal spectators, mindless followers. The result is a failure to organize both inside and outside the UAW.

When threatened with job cuts the service model union doesn't resist, confront, and challenge authority. The service model union compromises with management and negotiates the peaceful transition to a reduced workforce burdened with speedups and excessive overtime. The top priority of union staff is to preserve their own gravy jobs. Hence joint programs and joint funds.

The service model union uses concessions and cooperation to appease the corporate beast and the scheme pays off big time. Since 1992 millions of dollars from joint funds have been used to pay the salaries of UAW staffers.

No wonder they support the joint programs. Total joint revenues for the 1992-1997 period was over \$360 million. No wonder GM/UAW negotiators dipped into the joint fund to cover vacation

pay for the Flint strikers. Seven million would just about cover it. Chump change for the pork choppers and lots more where that came from. It's an easy skim from either side of the table and absolutely no accountability.

The joint funds are tax-exempt because they are administered by an independent non-profit corporation designed to train workers. GM provides all the dollars but half of the board of directors of this flim flam corporation are UAW staffers. This nifty arrangement is not mentioned in the UAW constitution and has no democratic controls.

The Union purportedly wants to discourage excessive overtime in order to create more jobs. That's simple math. Now here's the story problem.

In order to discourage overtime the union bargained for and GM agreed to pay up to an additional \$5.00 per hour for excessive overtime. The extra money doesn't go into the pockets of the actual workers who work the excessive overtime. No, it is deposited into the joint funds. Lo and behold, overtime has not been reduced and UAW staffers are wallowing in the excess funds.

If X=worker, and Y=O.T., and Z=staffer, then $X+Y=ZxZxZxZxZ$.

Cooperation schemes have not worked for the rank and file. We have lost thousands of jobs each year. But cooperation has worked for the porkchoppers. Their fat jobs are on the upswing. There's plenty of clipboards to go around.

Special thanks to Bill Hamline, a UAW member at GM-Delphi in Decatur, Alabama whose dogged determination uncovered the morass surrounding the slush fund. After two years of run around from the International, Bill finally figured out how to push the right buttons and through the Freedom of Information Act obtained IRS documents. This is big business, folks.

In Brother Yokich's opening remarks to the convention he bragged about refurbishing Black Lake. (Do you have any idea how much it costs to build a golf course?)

One Quality Network Rep. explained to me that joint union/management programs conducted at Black Lake generated the money for renovation. (Does a new golf course fall under the rubric, renovation?) The QN Rep. thought this was a good trade off. I think it stinks. I think it's an insult to the memory of Walter Reuther to give management preferential access to Black Lake, the UAW's Family Education Center.

When you pay big bucks to sit at the table, you start ordering the waiters around. The only people who benefit from the cooperative relationship are the rulers and their flunkies.

The UAW Constitution gives members the right and the means to make leaders accountable. The UAW Constitution guarantees my right as a delegate to vote according to my own conscience. The UAW Constitution is a priceless document, but it's not worth a tinker's damn if we don't use it.

A local union that doesn't bother to submit a single resolution to a Constitutional Convention is asleep on the job. But apathy is a predictable symptom of the psuedo-democratic, service model, business union. The corporation and their porkchopper counterparts prefer an apathetic, demoralized, complacent, uninformed, dispirited, non-assertive work force. It's easier to manipulate.

Next fall we face what may be the most important negotiations of our work life. Everything is up for grabs. GM tipped its hand last summer when it showed a willingness to lose barrels of money for an insignificant concession. We need a strong willed aggressive union in order to succeed. It's time to light a fire under the hound dog's ass.

....to be continued....

Fraternally,
Gregg Shotwell
GreggShotwell@aol.com
UAW Local 2151