

Live Bait & Ammo #131: Work is the only Power We Own

Power respects power not punks. In manufacturing power is production not grievances. If you wait for UAW office rats to act, you won't get a break until you're flat on your back.

The GM plant in Lansing which makes crossover SUVs is working full bore but GM refuses to call back laid off workers for summer replacements. It's a trend. Workers are expected to sacrifice time off with their families and postpone vacations "until the end of the year" or whenever it suits management. GM isn't satisfied to cut wages, benefits, and hard won work rules. Now they want to control when, if ever, workers take vacation. What next? Less break time? Shave another six minutes and doublestitch the repetitive stress?

Slow down. It's the only way to exert power and get what workers deserve: time off at full pay, recall of laid off brothers and sisters, and a humane work pace. Vacation isn't entitlement. It's earned.

When management canceled summer vacations at my old plant, we raised hell. We circulated petitions. We demanded a rank & file meeting with the boss, and his boss, and his boss's boss, and on up the ladder. We weren't just talking words. To put some heft in the talk we walked real slow. Production crawled, keeled over, and passed out. Management canceled summer vacations but like the proverbial horse led to water they couldn't make us work and soon restored the protocol for summer vacations: summer replacement workers.

One of the reasons that summer vacations were canceled at the GM plant in Coopersville back in 1993 was because our sister plant in Austria got the whole month of August off and we had to make up for the lag in production. While Austrian workers enjoyed fresh air and sunshine with their families, we were expected to work 24/7 in a polluted factory with fluorescent lighting.

Europeans get better pay, more time off, universal health care, state funded college education, and we get "freedom". Freedom to work longer for less. Freedom to pay exorbitant prices for prescriptions and health care. Freedom to take out a second mortgage in order to send our children to college. Freedom to maintain military bases in 130 countries. Freedom to support a government that funds bankruptcies, plant closings, and offshoring. Freedom to vote for concessions until voting is the only thing left to concede.

What's the sense of trying to keep up when progress means you continually work harder for less? It's like trying to walk up a down escalator. If you outpace the stairway to hell, you get to the next floor only to find you have 29 more flights to go before they cancel your health care and dump your pension. Might as well pull the plug while the lights are still on and you can find the outlet.

The promise of pension and health care in retirement was a hoax. No money was invested in a trust for health care. Two years ago they told us the pension was over funded, now it's going broke, right along with our 401-k plans and our homes. It's a hoax. With each new contract we make more concessions on the premise that concessions save jobs. Work hard and you'll get ahead is drummed into our heads. It's a hoax.

Experience has taught us well. Don't trust the boss. Don't trust the company. Don't trust the government. Don't trust the union. Don't trust the stock market. Don't trust any kind of broker or financial advisor. Beware of those who claim they are messengers of the divine market and advise you to bend meekly to the will of forces beyond your control. It's a hoax. The "free" market is rigged to lower wages. Capital stripmines labor and leaves toxic waste dumps in place of pensions.

Who can you trust? Your coworkers. When in doubt, ask your coworkers for help. Don't take chances. Work slowly and safely and ask your coworkers for help. When the boss makes threats, keep your mouth shut and slow down. When the boss says hurry, drag your feet. When management demands overtime, help your coworkers by slowing down more. If a union rep says, "Management has the right to manage," don't trust the rep, trust your coworkers, and slow down harder. You want a stimulus plan that creates jobs? Slow down.

When management says no one can have time off, help your coworkers by going to the nurse or the boss or the cafeteria and throwing up. When they pay less, work less. When your coworkers get walked out or laid off or injured, slow down. When the cost of living goes up, compensate yourself by slowing down. When they raise the price of gas, drive slower. When they raise the price of medicine, grow your own. When they raise utility prices, conserve energy with a rapidly advancing slowdown. If you're a soldier deployed in Iraq or Afghanistan, slow down. There's nothing to win. As soon as one war ends, they'll start another. Don't get fired. Say, "Yes, sir," and slow down.

Power respects power. Show them you mean business. Slow down. Work is the only power we own. Join the Solidarity Holiday Movement with a simple act of self preservation and protest. Slow down.