

Live Bait & Ammo #177: The One-Two Punch

UAW's resolution goal failed to meet the deadline. I am not disheartened. The long term goal is to restore the UAW to not only an honest union, but a fighting union controlled by the rank and file through direct action. Such comprehensive organizing takes time and perseverance. The movement continues.

Page ten of the Government's Sentencing Memorandum, Case No. 19-20520, United States of America, v. Michael Grimes, Defendant, states: ". . . the culture of corruption within the senior leadership of the UAW is systemic. The need to transform the unethical, greedy, and self-indulgent behavior characteristic of the UAW leadership is long overdue."

The transformation of rank and file UAW members is also long overdue and the pattern of helpless resignation in the UAW membership is systemic. Transformation will take time and commitment. The organization of oppressed people against all odds has been done before.

On August 25, 1925 A. Philip Randolph met with fifty porters in the Elks Hall in Harlem. C.L. Dellums recalled: "We were a handful of Negroes. Had nothing. No money, no experience in this. I used to say that all we had was what God gave the lizard. We succeeded after twelve long, bitter, expensive years. Somewhere between 500 and 1,000 men were discharged from the Pullman Company as a result of union activity."

On August 25, 1937 twelve years later, the first economic agreement between an African-American organization and a white institution was signed. For Randolph it was only round one.

Randolph was a constant thorn in the side of the AFL leadership as he persistently battled for the abolishment of discriminatory practices. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters [BSCP] joined the AFL for valid endorsement and because as Randolph stated, "We never separated the liberation of the white working man from the liberation of the black working man. The unity of these forces would bring about the power to achieve basic social change."

Randolph and the BSCP preferred to stay and fight rather than to allow the Federation to practice its discriminatory policies unchallenged.

Every year at the AFL convention, from 1933 on, Randolph introduced a resolution to refuse certification to unions that denied membership to African-Americans. Every year he was ignored. In 1964 it finally became a Federal law. Resistance only made Randolph and his supporters more determined. Perseverance pays off.

In WWII the Armed Services were segregated and African-Americans were barred from working in defense industries. When Black leaders confronted Boeing Aircraft in Seattle about discriminatory hiring policies, the district organizer for the International Association of Machinists said, "Labor has been asked to make many sacrifices in the war and has made them gladly, but this sacrifice [the admission of Blacks] is too great."

Despite acute labor shortages, unions, employers, and the government excluded African-Americans from job opportunities. Randolph began organizing. By the summer of 1941 he was set to lead an estimated 100,000 black marchers down Pennsylvania Ave.

President Roosevelt asked him to cancel the march in return for his personal promise of better treatment. Randolph had heard too many personal promises. Face to face with one of the most powerful, dynamic, persuasive leaders in the world, Randolph refused to back down. He was ready. The BSCP stood behind him. Roosevelt knew he wasn't bluffing. Boldness paid off.

In exchange for Executive Order No. 8802 establishing the Fair Employment Practice Committee, Randolph called off the march. Historian Lerone Bennet Jr. called Randolph's

showdown, “. . . one of the most brilliant power plays ever executed by a Negro leader, if not the most brilliant.”

In the minds of most people the March on Washington in 1963 was the highlight of the Civil Rights Movement. Homer Glenn, a porter from New York, told it like it is. “You can go out today among black people and you can take a \$1,000 with you and bet everyone you see a \$1,000 that Randolph was head of the March on Washington and they’ll say King. But Randolph was the man who set up the March on Washington.”

Without organizers like A. Philip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters “I Have a Dream” would be dust in the wind. We can’t confront power with petition. We need mass organization and direct action: the one-two punch.

How can rank and file UAW members take on the powerful and corrupt Administrative Caucus? One Local, one Region, at a time.

Several years ago a retired UAW member, Jack Kiedel, from UAW Local 634 in Buffalo, NY told me a story about rank and file revolt against a corrupt Local Union. The Local Union was run by a clique of family and friends and allied with the Administrative Caucus.

Jack said, “We [rank and file] all knew each other and a bunch of us went to every union meeting and we saw who showed up, and who ran things. We were well liked on the shopfloor. Everybody knew us. We knew the vote counts weren’t right. Hell, they had more votes than members sometimes.”

Jack said that the Local held ratifications and elections for officers, not at the Union Hall, but in a garage at a corner store. They used paper ballots. The Local expected to have a routine rubber stamp meeting in which they anticipated passing a motion to once again use the garage at the corner store and paper ballots.

Things didn’t proceed as planned. Rank and file members organized and unexpectedly showed up at the union meeting. Jack said, “We outnumbered them two, maybe, three to one. But we didn’t know anything about Roberts Rules of Order.”

Instead of a show of hands or a standup vote, where members vote by standing on separate sides of a room, the Local President proposed a secret ballot vote on the motion. One of the rank and file members saw an envelope sticking out of the back pocket of one of the Local Union lackeys. He grabbed it and found it filled with ballots already marked.

Jack said, “We decided no one was going to leave until we had a standup vote where we could all see the count.”

Rank and file members padlocked and guarded the doors and demanded a standup vote. The president called for adjournment but he was shouted down. He said he going to call the police and the crowd yelled, “Go ahead.”

When the police arrived rank and file members explained what was going on and the cops said, “This is union business.” And they left.

Rank and file members forced a standup vote and out voted the Administrative Caucus. They got voting machines certified by the state of New York. And they learned from studying the UAW Constitution that they could have “watchers.”

Organization exerts power in direct action. Yeah, the one-two punch.

Stay Solid, Shot

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