

Live Bait & Ammo # 47

Workers at Toyota in Georgetown, Kentucky are attempting to organize a union. What an inspiration. People like them give me hope for the future. Most of us got a job and the next day someone said, "Oh, by the way, we have a union." So we paid our dues, voted occasionally, and took it all for granted. We expected someone to take care of our business and represent our interests. Somebody has to be drain commissioner, right? Might as well be the other guy.

When workers organize from the ground up, actually make their own choices based on hard lessons and common sense, the result can be potent. Workers who take the risks and do the hard work of organizing acquire a genuine feeling of ownership and camaraderie. It's a heady brew. I'm not surprised some folks are afraid to take the reins of their own destiny.

The task of building a union to confront the consolidated power of a multinational corporation takes guts and savvy and passionate conviction. There is nothing common about shop floor organizers. They have my utmost admiration and regard. I'm not talking about the professionals (though they have a role I respect as well). For me, it's the volunteer organizers on the front lines who square off with the boss and his herd of turkeys day after day who are the real prize fighters. Win, lose, or draw, they never crawl, and that is true dignity in my book.

A group of company loyalists who call themselves "Truth Finders" are distributing anti union, pro company propaganda which includes selected excerpts from Live Bait & Ammo. As usual the "Truth Finders" don't sign their names.

I have two mottoes I live by:

- 1) A writer without an edge is worth less than a dull knife.
- 2) A worker without a union is a miserable life.

To suggest that I am anti union is like accusing Patrick Henry of saying, "God save the King."

I don't deny that I critique the union and challenge its leaders. Standing up and speaking out is what being a union activist is all about. I even sign my name. It's called self respect. That's what I like about being a union member - I don't have to walk around with my tail between my legs and pretend I like it.

I am not anti union. I'm an agitator. I want union officials to quit keeping the powder dry and haul out the damn cannons. That's why I call my newsletter Live Bait & Ammo, it's bait for some and ammo for others. On two occasions the corporation has tried to stop me from distributing Live Bait & Ammo. They didn't succeed. The union on the other hand has never tried to infringe on my freedom of speech or my right to challenge authority.

For me, belonging to a union isn't about nickels and dimes, it's about self respect and dignity and the right of workers to determine the conditions of their labor.

No one who works for a living has to "find" the truth. The truth hits you on the nose every day you go to work. The company has all the power. They can ruin your life at a moment's notice or slowly and methodically drag you through thirty years of hell.

The bosses want one thing and one thing only: absolute control.

Union members want the right to determine the conditions of their labor and to ensure a fair share of the wealth they produce.

It's democracy versus the plantation mentality.

I'll take the rough and tumble struggle of a union over indentured servitude any day. The choice is clear: give me dignity or give me slow death by subjugation and shame.

The "Truth Finders" dispense a lot of disinformation, but to my way of thinking their most erroneous inference is the pretense that Toyota really cares about workers. The nameless "Truth Finders" are like cheap dates. They put out for promises and sweet nothings.

Fair warning, brothers and sisters, a sucker punch is not a kiss. I've worked in non union shops. They are run by the rule of favoritism and it's a blunt instrument in a thoughtless hand. Sucking up is a way of life in non union shops. Some people may find truth in that posture, but men and women who'd rather fight than live on their knees organize a union.

I understand workers are grateful for good paying jobs in a depressed economic environment. The question is: What will happen to those good paying jobs if unions are defeated? Or more to the point: What sort of pay and benefits do you think Toyota would offer without a UAW knocking on the door?

Whatever the market will bear is the standard answer. Without the pressure of a union, companies will drive wages down to the dirt and the out of pocket cost of health care up to the sky. That's not conjecture, it's fact. Blinders are for horses not for men. "Truth Finders" who foster illusions of corporate kindness will likely find proof in an abandoned strip mine.

Toyota is the master of lean and mean production. When it comes to driving workers harder and faster and longer, nobody beats Toyota. When it comes to extracting the maximum pound of flesh and sweat from workers, Toyota is the uncontested king.

Workers in Georgetown, Kentucky need to look to the future and ask themselves some honest questions. Would you rather rely on a contract, or Toyota's word of mouth? When times get tough will Toyota put the interests of workers on the list of priorities? When the wear and tear starts to take its toll on aging line workers, will their seniority count for a well earned place of honor, or a boot in the ass? When Toyota decides to shut the door and move to Texas or Guatemala or Indonesia, do you think they will give "team members" early retirement? Transfer rights? Health care? Or condolences?

The "Truth Finders" seem to think Toyota is Santa Claus, but the little elves are in for a rude wake up. Toyota is loyal to Toyota. Period. Toyota doesn't give a damn about anything but profit and workers are an expendable liability, not a valuable asset in the corporate scheme.

There is an ongoing war of attrition against workers. Union members are in the trenches. I don't find the politics complex or the choices difficult because I don't concern myself with policies or ideologies. I just pick sides. When I see a worker stand up to the boss and demand respect, when I see any one, any time, any where fight for their rights, I'm on their side.

I hope workers in Georgetown, Kentucky join in the struggle for justice and dignity and self determination. We need every minuteman we can get.

Stay Solid,

UAW Local 2151

Send the shop floor organizers in Georgetown a note of support at www.outsidetrack.com or www.uawtmmk.com