

Live Bait & Ammo #34

--Day One of the Bargaining Con--

Back to back conventions in Vegas? Sounds like an episode of Survivor. The format even included a word from our corporate sponsors. The official explanation for back to back conventions was to save money. But I saw no evidence of frugality. I did notice there were far fewer retirees picketing and leafleting for pension improvements and prescription coverage. And very few rank and file observers.

At the last Bargaining Convention, three years ago in Detroit, a thousand seats were reserved for guests. The atmosphere in '99 was intense. But this year's attitude was, Oh well, and so what. And why not? Traditionally the Bargaining Convention is held a few months before negotiations for the Big Three contracts begin. But the contracts don't expire until next year. The excitement could have been contained in a teapot. A third of the seats on the convention floor were empty.

In G-Finger's opening remarks he cited accelerating globalization and unfair trade as the major obstacles to effective bargaining. But there are more autoworkers in the US today than ever. The market for organizing is fat but the unavoidable fact is: the UAW is a business union not an organizing union.

Ron's Team believes we can improve organizing by asking corporate partners to pressure suppliers to be neutral during organizing drives. Token neutrality in return for what? The right to strike? The policy reeks of company/unionism. What do we give up in negotiations for neutrality agreements? A promise to cooperate with lean production and outsourcing? Instead of neutrality we should demand NO SCAB PARTS IN UAW SHOPS.

G-Finger sent Local 2036 out on strike but apparently without forethought. He had no strategy, no plan to mobilize union members. When the UAW's corporate partners brushed them off, the International busted the Local and washed their hands.

Gettelfinger is a corporatist, that is, he believes our fortunes as union members are tied to the company's apron strings. At the Ford sub council where union members convened to devise a bargaining strategy, he invited Lord Ford and his stooges to

explain to members how sacrifices would be necessary. Ford's problems are not the fault of union members, or union wages. Does Ford invite UAW members to Board of Directors meetings to advise them how they should make sacrifices for the good of the community?

The traditional union goal is to take labor out of the competition by establishing equal pay, equal production standards, and pattern bargaining. When the union accepts the premise of competitiveness, it accepts the inevitability of concessions and job losses.

Gettelfinger's conception of realistic bargaining doesn't resolve the conflict of over capacity and job security by shortening the work week. His strategy is what Jerry Tucker coined democratic concession making. You vote on which concessions you get to make and you debate who gets to make the most.

The Finger made one emphatic point: The UAW will not, WILL NOT, allow the auto companies to shift the cost of health care onto the backs of our members. But then he qualified his line in the sand by saying, The health care crisis in America cannot be solved at the bargaining table. This is a national political issue. Oh.

We've heard it all before. We have watched our health care coverage erode and our co-pays rise. I expect that we will make more sacrifices, but like last time they will be concealed until after ratification when the wrapping paper comes off.

The featured speaker at the Bargaining Con was Stephen Girsky, a stock analyst. The UAW has an excellent research department, but G-Finger outsourced the job to Wall Street.

Girsky crunched the numbers and graphed the stats, then sagely prophesied that we needed to reduce the cost of health care and pensions and pressure suppliers to cut prices. He said Delphi and Visteon still need parental guidance as they aren't ready to promenade in the open market without a chaperone. Not one new thought. We might as well have consulted some 50 year old white guy who likes to farm and blow shit up with fertilizer.

After that they read to us for a really long time. Stupefied delegates put their heads down on tables and drooled. At 2 p.m. we were shuttled onto buses and

transported to a picket line for culinary workers on Fremont Street which is like Old Town in Vegas.

I did not get on the bus. My underdeveloped herd instinct has an aversion to following authority. I went back to my room, dumped my tote, and caught a cab.

The cabbie said, You want to go the long way? It costs a little more but it's faster.

Take the fast way, man.

Most cabbies in Vegas drive like they were on the golf course. You'd think they got paid by the hour. But Jake got his training in Chicago. He made a U-turn, cut off an ambulance, tacked across a parking lot like a downhill slalom skier, raced down an alley, and gunned it up an on ramp to the freeway. It was the most real excitement I'd had in Vegas.

I told him I was with the UAW and I was going to join the culinary workers for a picket. He explained that the rest of the culinary workers at the big casinos on the strip had already settled. They got what they wanted and left their brothers and sisters on the other side of the tracks to fend for themselves. No way those culinary workers at the old casinos can get the same package now that their brothers and sisters have left them hanging in the wind.

It sounded familiar: settle the Big Three national contracts; leave the locals and second class IPS members to fight on their own.

Do you think they settled the big casinos in time for the UAW convention?

This is Vegas. It's always show time. You didn't have to cross a picket line, instead you get to walk a picket line, and feel good about it, and go home happy.

What if the union had said, settle all together, or we picket the UAW Convention?

This is Vegas, man. The show must go on. They would have settled.

That or the porkchoppers would tell us to cross the picket line because it's just an 'informational' picket.

What's a porkchopper? I think we have some of them here, too.

I joined the picket line. The slogan was: One Union, One Health Care Plan. We walked around with our signs. There was no trouble. G-Finger & Co. Ltd. made speeches. It was a photo op for the same leaders who never made it down to Henderson, Ky. once in four years. It was a nice dog and pony show, safe, no one looked into the horse's mouth.

We could have walked, 2000 strong, into the restaurants, sat down, ordered coffee, and sipped on it for hours, not spending anything but time. What could they do, arrest us? Instead we walked around with picket signs and never bothered anybody.

The show must go on. It was hot. We didn't hang out long. We went back to air conditioned casinos on the strip, where we could eat and drink and gamble, and nobody had to think too much about culinary workers left out in the heat on Fremont Street.

To be continued.....

In Solidarity,

UAW Local 2151