

Live Bait & Ammo #9

Ed Northern, Delphi's leading cheerleader, has been humping the stump from Texas to New York. His road show has all the homely charm and contagious enthusiasm of a tent revival. While the alleged ravages of sinful waste wreak havoc all about the land, Ed holds forth the global anthem of saving grace, "Lean! Lean! Lean!"

An evangelistic fever carbonates his speech. "Lean" is repeated with hypnotic cadence like a Hindu mantra in a backwoods accent that lends the simple four letter word an unmistakably, nasty twist.

It's a weird mix and a heady brew. He promises salvation on the cross of competition and emotes optimism with a moonshiners grin. His vision of Deliverance is more reminiscent of the Hollywood version than the Biblical one. You can almost hear the pigs squealing in the background.

I have no doubt that Delphi will succeed because they'll buy out the competition and make workers the victims of their insatiable greed. Recently I spoke with a Mexican Delphi worker whose name will be withheld because she fears retaliation. She makes less than a dollar an hour. That's not the sad part. The sad part is that Delphi tells her she has to be more competitive. A coyote has more conscience than a Delphi executive.

Battenberg said that Delphi would be the "listening organization." We got a taste of what he meant when the road show hit Coopersville. Ed Northern and his entourage breezed into the third shift meeting twenty minutes late and spent the next thirty minutes competing to see who could say the magic word most often. Ed won. Then we had four minutes of questions and six minutes of rhetorical answers, that is, answers that repeat the questions. You don't have to do the math to see the numbers tell the tale of just exactly who will do the "listening" in this organization.

I figured I'd only have one chance to question The Lord of Lean, so I tried to pack it all into one shot. "First of all, I'd like to express appreciation for the opportunity to communicate directly. It's a rare occurrence around here. We union members feel that we are on the front lines of any value added work, yet we are the last to find out about any changes in organization, processes, classifications, etc. How do you propose to improve the relationship between management and union when the experts, the people who actually do the value added work, are ignored; when only selected people are actually permitted to participate in the decision making process; and the local union leadership is left out of the equation?"

Then I heard something I never thought I'd hear from a management person. Ed Northern said, "I agree with everything you just said. That was a great question." Too bad the answer wasn't great, but that's easy to explain. Delphi has a business plan that Ed can expound upon until all the oxygen in the room is gone. But when it comes to the union, the agenda is hidden in a foil of smiles, hype, and phony camaraderie. Get real.

Since 1992 Delphi has reduced its UAW work force by 42% and Merrill Lynch expects that trend to continue. Since the announcement of the spin-off those numbers are increasing daily. Delphi has made no attempt to halt the exodus. I'm not playing word games, that's the real agenda in action.

If you want to predict the future, you study history. In light of the wisdom gained thereby, you examine the present. The seeds of the future are evident in the here and now. Delphi plans to grow the business by gutting the union. Another union member piped up, "The last time you were here, you said, 'I don't close plants. I build plants.' Where and how soon are you going to build plants in the US?"

Northern started back pedaling fast on that one. He hurriedly explained that because of the successful implementation of lean manufacturing we now have a lot of vacant floor space available. He pledged to fill that floor space before he laid any concrete. He took a deep breath, blinked twice, then claimed he was going to 'triple the business.'" He said that Delphi Ewas going to be "adding social security numbers this year."

"You mean workers?" someone asked.

"Yes, workers", Ed said.

"American workers?"

"Yes, American workers."

"You mean hourly workers?"

"Yes, hourly workers."

"UAW workers?"

"Yes, UAW workers. That's hard to believe, isn't it."

Yes Ed, it certainly is hard to believe.

When union members in Rochester, NY asked him how he felt about the hundreds of workers retiring and transferring out of Delphi he replied that he wanted them to go because they were "not the kind of workers that Delphi needs". He wants workers who use one hand to do their job and the other hand to help their co-worker. When asked if they were going to replace vacating workers he said , no, it's called "cost savings and lean manufacturing."

Yes Ed, it is hard to believe a person who continually changes his story.

While Northern spewed his unsubstantiated, pie in the sky predictions of unlimited expansion in the good old USA, Donald Runkle, president of Delphi E, was busy hosting the official dedication of Delphi's newest and largest Technical Center located right in the heart of Juarez, Mexico. Delphi employs about 200,000 people worldwide. More than 40% of those employees are in Mexico. Just the facts, Ed.

Northern's pompous prediction to "triple the business" is pure conjecture, verbal snake oil. Since the announcement of the spin-off, three of our top level managers in Coopersville have retired and two more went to work for furniture factories. How are we supposed to believe our future is hopeful when those in the know are jumping ship? If he couldn't convince them to stay aboard, what can he expect of us? We know the score. When his pipe dreams don't come true, workers will take the hit. He'll feel no guilt for letting the axe fall on thousands of working families.

In this glorified era of casino capitalism growth is engendered by hype and hyperbole; the counterfeit standard of the bottom line is used to justify a reckless, unconscionable war against workers world wide; success is measured in numbers with no regard for the damage to overworked families and their communities plundered for tax breaks and then stranded with abandoned lots of industrial wreckage and toxic waste; globalization is just a four bit word for sweatshop; lean is code for downsize.

Our day to day experience with local management on the shop floor gives us no reason to expect the Delphi/UAW relationship will be any improvement over the past. As Delphi attempts to cut our wages, jeopardize our pensions, undermine the union with a two tier wage, and overburden workers with multiple tasks and speed-ups that simply amount to the loss of more UAW jobs, their agenda becomes more and more clear: GM intends to subjugate the union.

We will demand a strike.

In Solidarity,

UAW Local 2151