

Live Bait & Ammo # 78

The most striking thing about a Gettelfinger speech is how sincerely insincere he can be. You can almost hear the McGuire Sisters harmonizing in the background and wiping schmaltz on their aprons as he screams, "Solidarity! Solidarity! Solidarity Forever!"

The man who perpetuates a self image of frugality and religious devotion shepherds his flock into the sleaziest city in America and condemns corporate extravagance without blinking. The man who evokes the words of Walter Reuther to justify concessions doesn't acknowledge the passing of Victor Reuther last year. The man who flaunts his work ethic adjourns the convention early just as he did the Bargaining Con four years ago. The man who talks about innovation has one solution for everything: blame the Republicans.

The threat is clear. The plan of action is vague and feeble. Gettelfinger is long on rhetoric, short on tactic, and weak on direct action. Beneath the hoopla and the helium balloons I detected a simmering discontent.

On the second day of the Con Con I spoke in opposition to the Resolution on Outsourcing.

"It's not enough to talk the talk. We have to walk the walk.

In 1999 GM executed the the largest outsourcing scheme in UAW history. They not only outsourced our work, they transferred our pensions from GM to Delphi.

We didn't fight. We chose to negotiate. We failed.

Now they are coming to finish the job.

For those of us at Delphi it feels like we are in the Alamo. We are surrounded and they are coming to finish us off.

Every so often we get a message. Some workers, some hostages, may be released. Many who leave are going under duress. They aren't ready, or they are going out on

the 50 and 10 [Fifty years old and at least ten years pension credit] and it isn't enough.

I said to one brother, "It's not enough. How are you going to make it?"

"My wife has cancer," he said. "I have to go."

The rest of us must stay and fight. Some of us have no choice.

Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, Delphi is a line in the sand. What happens at Delphi is the future of the UAW.

Delphi workers are in the Alamo, and we are listening for the calvary. But we don't hear the boots on the pavement.

We need to hear boots on the pavement. We need a one day general strike for Delphi workers just like the immigrant workers. If immigrants could organize a national day of solidarity, why can't the UAW?

Delphi workers feel threatened. We feel isolated.

I call on this convention to stand up for Delphi workers. I call on this convention to show their support and solidarity with Delphi workers."

You could have heard a pin drop. But we don't need the wisdom of silence. We need to hear the sound of boots on the ground. But none comes. None comes. All I could hear was the ca-ching-ca-ching of slot machines and the distant creaking of coffins as the souls of old union heroes turned over in their graves.

Organizing isn't an optional item like a sun roof or floor mats. Organizing is essential to unionism as powertrain is to the auto industry. You can stamp out quarter panels, upholster seats, and design interiors with more flash and flamboyance than a UAW Convention in Las Vegas, Nevada. But if you ain't got the engine, you ain't got the swing.

Organizing, like internal combustion, is the driving force the union vehicle is built around. Since the UAW replaced internal organizing with company-union

partnership, we've lost the power to organize externally. Currently all UAW propulsion is hooked to the corporate drive shaft. Porkchoppers may pretend it's a parade, but brothers and sisters, we're getting towed to the junkyard, not upstage.

A few years ago I traveled to Georgetown, Kentucky to meet with volunteer organizers at Toyota. I wrote articles about them and I wrote articles for them. In particular I wrote a four page rebuttal to the anti union propagandists called "Truth for Truthfinders". That was the easy part. The more difficult task was the UAW's record of concession and company-union collaboration.

I asked the volunteer organizers what they hoped a union would help them achieve. Five goals predominated.

1.) A defined pension. The UAW is moving away from defined pension in new contracts.

2.) Health insurance for retirees. The UAW negotiated takeaways from retiree health care.

3.) An end to the discrimination of two tier wages and/or temp workers. The UAW is negotiating two tier supplements for new hires and permitting more extensive utilization of temps.

4.) The safety and integrity that work rules provide. The UAW is conceding work rules.

5.) Democracy. The UAW is a one party state. Thus, ratification of contracts is the rank and file's most effective expression of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the leadership. UAW members are losing the right to ratify.

Recently Delphi members learned that six cents was diverted from our COLA for the retiree's VEBA. GM workers voted to approve that concession, but Delphi workers were never given the opportunity to vote on that change in the contract.

Likewise Delphi workers were not permitted to vote on the two tier supplement that was imposed on new hires in the 2003 national agreement.

The Concession Caucus opened the 2003 contract and retirees were deprived of accrued vested benefits without their consent.

In 1999 all the pension credits we earned with GM were transferred to Delphi. We were not informed prior to ratification of the contract and thus, we had no chance to express our disapproval.

The Concession Caucus is promoting the Toyota model of workplace organization. The CC is depriving members of the right to ratify contract changes. The CC, in violation of Article 19 Section 6 of the UAW Constitution, is encouraging whipsawing competition between locals. The CC is not defending workers rights on the job. A case in point, at a Delphi plant, Local 696, in Dayton, Ohio the Bargaining Chair was fired; the Local President was arrested in the plant for “trespassing”; rank and file members are routinely subjected to harassment, intimidation, and suspension; the Concession Caucus has done nothing to protect them.

Why should non union workers take the risk to organize for a union that won’t defend its dues paying members? Who needs a union to bargain for concessions and against union work rules?

Organizing is the pivotal challenge we face as a union. The Concession Caucus chose not to address the “Proposed Resolution on Organizing” at the convention. They were too busy pumping helium into balloons.

In Gettelfinger’s opening remarks he stated; “The challenges we face aren’t the kind that can be ridden out. They’re structural challenges, and they require new and farsighted solutions.”

The structural challenges Gettelfinger referred to were restructurings in the automotive business. But the structural challenge we face as a union is organizing workers not employers. If we had succeeded at organizing workers in the transplants, both the UAW and the Big 3 would be in a stronger position today. Organizing is the business of the union and the Concession Caucus evaded the debate preferring company-union collaboration and pandering for the Democrats despite the fact their “partners” are cheating on them and John Kerry didn’t use the word union even once during his acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention in 2004. Our failure to organize has rendered us irrelevant.

Toyota workers don't want a Toyota style workplace, or a contract that gives the boss the whip and workers the pink slip. The Concession Caucus strategy of card check neutrality with employers is not a realistic option at Toyota or Honda or even BMW.

If we don't draw the line at Delphi, we send a message of defeat. The UAW can't retreat to victory. If we aren't willing to fight for organized workers, how can we expect unorganized workers to fight for the UAW? We can't stand down at Delphi and expect non union workers to stand up for the UAW. Non union workers don't need a buy out, they need a buy in. The only way to succeed at organizing is fight to win. Retreat is not an option. If Delphi is allowed to succeed in its attempt to break contracts and dump workers, all the multinationals will follow suit.

The Concession Caucus is scared and it shows. If we fail to organize Toyota, Gettelfinger's legacy may well be the epitaph of the UAW.

sos, shotwell