

Live Bait & Ammo #85: That our children may have peace

"In the progress of politics, as in the common occurrences of life, we are not only apt to forget the ground we have traveled over, but frequently neglect to gather up experience as we go."

-- Tom Paine

The bad news is, I have a long commute since I transferred back to GM from Delphi. The good news is, I'm working the road to rule. I drive slower than a mule with hot cargo and expired plates. Screw the oil companies. I get forty miles to the gallon. I relax like a poor man with a radio and nowhere to go. I lean like a lowrider whose vehicle is the destination. I pause in motion with an unlikely simile — a silo in a wind — knowing I've already arrived where I am. I treat the highway of American industry and commerce like a place of idleness and repose. This isn't Zen, it's revolt. My time is worth more than money to me because I can't earn any more of it I can only spend it wisely.

I work in a warehouse which is a place where goods are stashed and money is made literally hand over fist. It's all in the turn over. We produce no thing. We add no value. We receive the goods and we ship the goods and the mark up for the time between makes the loan sharks on Shake St. look like Saint Vincent DePaul. But the magnum of profit doesn't halt the speed up. We can't march fast enough for the General. There's only one solution: shoot the drummer.

Is it maximum profit or minimum conscience that drives our nation to compete for the lowest standard of living? Even children are sideswiped in the race to the bottom line. Schools are turned into sweatshops. Hospitals are managed like maquiladoras. Homelessness is mental health therapy. Prison is substance abuse treatment. Every program or agency whose purpose is to serve the public interest is underfunded, abused, and degraded. Our families suffer under the yoke of double wage earners without disposable income or time to spend with their children. Meanwhile congress debates whether a minimum wage which snorkels the poverty line will ruffle the feathers and furs on Wall Street.

The madness of the method isn't just about money. The vultures already have all the money. They have plans for all the money you and I will ever make in our life time. They have plans for our pensions, our 401k's, the money that falls through

the hole in the doughnut they call prescription drug coverage for seniors. They have plans to profit off the deaths of our brothers and sisters in Iraq and Afghanistan. It's not just about the money. It's about control.

When the debt comes due, when the dollar deflates, when property values tank, and the market collapses, what will the wealthiest of the wealthy do? Seize everything of value. Buy up the homes of workers for a dime on the dollar; snap up utilities at bargain basement prices; then jack up rents and rates in tandem. They'll commandeer all the hard assets, the natural resources, the oil and the gold. Just thinking about it makes me drive slower.

And the slower I go the more the knowledge of where I've been and where I'm going comes into focus. The more I listen to the radio spin circles around my vehicle, the more I notice what's missing from our conversation about the common good, namely, the working class. There is no "middle class" and "lower class" in America. There are only workers who have decent jobs, and workers who don't have decent jobs. Those who do hold decent jobs are only one catastrophic illness, one plant closing, or one indefinite layoff from destitution. The victims of capital's creative destruction aren't strangers. They are working class Americans made destitute by a system that requires unemployment to hold down inflation.

Lou Dobbs is wrong about the growing demise of the middle class in America. There is no middle class to demise. The mantle of middle class status presumes a degree of security and upward mobility which doesn't exist. The notion of safety draped like the boss's arm around one's shoulder is based on the premise that hard work pays off and loyalty is rewarded. The middle class dream is as dead as the deer I see splattered on the highway everyday. There is no middle class for special workers. There is only a working class, and we — however special we may feel — all work in the same demoralized place, under the same relentless pressure to sacrifice our lives for the success of a godless corporation. Where will it end?

Despite expectations to make a billion dollars in net profit, Harley-Davidson in Milwaukee demanded the union impose a two tier wage and benefit cut in order to secure "new" work. Union members voted the double-cross down soundly. But union leaders pursued a vigorous campaign to promote the competitive ideal. On the second try the traitor's deal was narrowly ratified.

The soul of a union leader who pushes two tier is darker than the pupil of a well digger's eye. Every union leader knows there's no water at the bottom of that hole. Two tier is not just about money, it's about control. Harley-Davidson's extortion didn't stop at the doorstep of the union hall. The state of Wisconsin agreed to provide help with infrastructure improvements, training costs, and even capital. The assault on workers is state sponsored. Health, education, and social programs get slashed while the corporate blitzkrieg on the working class is subsidized. Mussolini would be impressed, but Tom Paine would shoulder the musket of conviction: "If there must be trouble, let it be in my day, that my child may have peace."

Two tier is not just about the money, it's about who owns whose soul. The most effective way to break the spirit of the working class is to compromise our moral code by forcing a choice between fighting back or betraying what is most precious — our children.

We stand at the crossroad knowing full well where both roads lead. One road leads to dishonor and the other to the dignity of struggle. One road points to the hope and courage of collective action and the other to shame, despair, and isolation.

After such knowledge, what forgiveness?

Will reduced wages mean the work will be safer or more humane? Will reduced benefits mean more security? Or will it simply mean the collective power of workers will be harnessed to serve our masters' driving passion — maximum profit for minimum wage. The corpos must think we are dumber than horses. The yoke never lightens, the hardship never wanes, and the hope for retirement in dignity fades like a dope smoker's dream.

Last year while Delphi was making headlines with threats and intimidation, Hastings Piston Ring, an auto supplier in northern Michigan, quietly and with the blessing of the federal court, cut off pension and health care for retirees. Production of piston rings didn't miss a beat and the profit kept pumping like a flathead eight on a straightaway.

Two tier for new hires and a kick down the stairs for retirees. That's the refrain.
Verses in between change only the names not the scheme.

Hastings Piston Ring, Harley-Davidson, and Delphi are not isolated cases. The degradation of the working class is chronic and contagious. We need collective action not more concessions. We need to try our souls in the temper of our times that our children may have peace.

(sos, gregg shotwell)

SOS
ACTION PLANNING CONFERENCE
SATURDAY DEC. 9
12:00 — 3:00 PM
BEST WESTERN
9087 E. BIRCH RUN RD.
BIRCH RUN, MI 48415

There is no seniority date for dignity and justice.
There is no retirement from solidarity.
Two tiers are too many.
Full employment is a workable reality.
Homeland security means Living Wages,
Universal Health Care,
Equal Access to Education
and Respect for Retirees.
Collective action won the War of Independence.
Collective action will win again.
Help us make an action plan.
All working people—
active or retired, union or non union,
employed or unemployed,
native born or immigrant—
are welcome
in
Soldiers of Solidarity