

Live Bait & Ammo #25

Recently a UAW member told me that we must "accentuate the positive".

We should withhold criticism of union leaders in order to show a united front. He said, "Our solidarity is too fragile to risk." But how, I ask, can we honorably stand silent when UAW leaders cut off strike benefits for locked out workers; practice nepotism as the favored system of union promotion; misappropriate union dues; lie to us in contract ratification meetings; and conspire with management to speed up production, implement concessions, and promote anti-union competition between locals and between workers within locals?

If we support a lie for the sake of appearances, how solid is the ground we make our stand on? The argument that any disagreement with a union leader violates the principle of solidarity is fundamentally anti-democratic. The demand for absolute loyalty and unquestionable subservience to authority is the dictate of tyrants.

I rebuke the Jim Jones version of solidarity. I refuse to drink the Kool Aid. I reject any rendition of solidarity that strips me of my self respect. The union that makes us strong isn't riddled with deceit. In true solidarity our word is our bond. As Mark Twain said, "Loyalty to the people always, loyalty to leaders when they deserve it."

The September issue of Solidarity magazine sports a picture of Yokich with Vincente Fox, the president of Mexico. Yokich asked Fox, "Why can't Mexican workers have the right to secret ballot elections to vote for any union?" I can well imagine Fox's reply. "Why can't UAW members have the right to secret ballot elections to vote for any UAW International leaders?"

In Allies Across the Border Dale Hathaway recounts several examples of solidarity actions between US unions and FAT [Frente Autentico del Trabajo] the Authentic Labor Front in Mexico. But there wasn't any mention of support from the UAW. In one example Teamsters, United Electrical Workers, United Steel Workers, Paperworkers, Canadian Autoworkers, and UNITE joined with FAT to confront Echlin, an auto parts company.

The Echlin Workers Alliance published a statement of purpose which said in part: "We are united in the belief that in this era of the global corporation and

unrestrained corporate greed, we must seek new and concrete forms of solidarity between workers.....as our bosses cross national boundaries in search of ever higher profits, our solidarity must also cross borders to build a strong international workers movement.....We will make a special effort to support Echlin workers in Mexico, who suffer the lowest wages and worst conditions and who face the worst repression when they stand up for their rights."

What does Yokich have to offer? Empty gestures and photo-ops.

Non English speaking workers at Mexican Industries in Detroit belong to a newly organized unit of UAW Local 600, an amalgamated octopus of a local that includes the Ford Rouge complex. For five months Mexican Industries deducted union dues from workers' checks but never paid the union. In comments to the press Local 600 president, Jerry Sullivan, indicated that an agreement had been made to defer payment of dues to help the company's cash flow: an unprecedented level of union/management cooperation. The company closed down and filed for bankruptcy protection.

The money is gone. The UAW withheld vital information from Mexican Industry workers, concealed from them the imminent risk of closure and layoff, and donated union dues to company coffers without the informed consent of the membership. But now that the rat is out of the bag, Solidarity reports that Local 600 "has kicked into high gear." The report claimed that 200 Mexican Industry workers took qualifying exams for possible jobs at Ford. The rag neglected to mention the exams were in English.

The same issue of Solidarity magazine extolled Ron Gettlefinger for mobilizing 2,000 UAW members to rally support for Ford CEO, Jacques Nasser during congressional hearings in Washington. The article failed to mention that Ford paid lost time and expenses. Typical Gettlefinger whoopee -- we don't care how many times the Explorer rolls over, as long as we get paid, we'll roll over too.

The very same issue of Solidarity rag described the plight of retirees who can't make ends meet. The UAW solicits \$2 per month of voluntary dues from retirees, an easy million bucks a month. Where does the money go? Politicians' pockets. Mostly the same politicians who with a Democratic president and Democratic controlled congress delivered NAFTA.

Paul Wellstone the progressive Senator from Minnesota has introduced a bill that would reform labor law, protect workers' rights, and make it easier for unions to organize. The UAW hasn't shown any support for the bill. Convoys for corporate coverups, but not for labor law reform? Do they expect Frère Jacques to bankroll a campaign for fair labor laws? These are the kinds of leaders you just want to get behind and push off the cliff.

UAW members who retired 13 years ago have watched their buying power plummet 50%. Without COLA on pensions the downward slide is inevitable. But Big Three retirees are the lucky ones. UAW retirees from Independent Part Suppliers have little or no pension and survive solely on social security unless they have found a job as a greeter at Wal-Mart. Charlie Holt, a dedicated 81 year old UAW member, is spearheading a drive by a group of retirees in Ohio to get the UAW to establish a fund for these destitute UAW members.

Solidarity House won't respond.

True solidarity is not a thin blanket used to cover the crimes, greed, and negligence of office rats. True solidarity is a tightly woven network of relationships intertwined with trust, threaded with loyalty and mutual respect, bound with honor and integrity, and guarded with courage and perseverance.

True solidarity like true democracy is not silent. President Nixon's appeal to "the silent majority" struck a strong if tacit chord in the seventies. Millions of citizens responded with a resounding silence; a profound, clarion tone not unlike the sound of one hand clapping.

The ultimate act of tyranny is not the police, it is the silence we impose on ourselves. The ultimate act of solidarity is to stand up and speak out for truth and justice.

We know in our hearts what is right and just. We know our American tradition. We know our Declaration of Independence asserts "...when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such

Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security." And from thence came the right to bear arms.

Members of UAW Local 879 in St. Paul, Minnesota threatened by Ford with closure and pressured by "The Finger" to make concessions and compete with other locals, have decided to reject phony unionism and lock arms with autoworkers from coast to coast. That is genuine solidarity. It's real, it's honest, and it isn't "fragile". October 17 is the kickoff of a national movement.

Heed the call. "If they close one plant, we will close them all." The UAW Solidarity Coalition will meet in Flint October 20-21. Unlike Black Lake, there won't be any drunkenness, gambling, or golf. But if you are an independent, open minded individual with an interest in democratic unionism and true solidarity, join us.

End the silence.

In Solidarity,

UAW Local 2151