

Live Bait & Ammo # 86:

Where Does the Road Paved with Concessions Go?

I used to enjoy road trips. The privilege of driving one's own vehicle — the comfort, the privacy, the independence — is, above all else, seductive. Speed is power and power intoxicates faster than a boilermaker on an empty stomach. When I hit the open road my mind hums with illusions of grandeur. Top it off with the whipped cream of rock and roll and I feel bright as a maraschino cherry. I'll take all my meals to go, thank you, good-bye.

The wanderlust of Americans is legendary. Our nation was conceived on the fly by desperadoes, fugitives, adventurers, runaways, gamblers, mercenaries, or — if you prefer them all mixed in a gumbo and served in a socially acceptable cup of a word — pioneers.

Pulling up roots and moving on is an American tradition. We are driven by our passion for change. We have come to regard excessive mobility as if it were a natural phenomenon, but the road was engineered and the object of our obsession for perpetual motion was manufactured. It's as if the boss said, "My way or the highway and they're both the same."

We weren't born with a gene to drive like devils. There was a time when all travel was a means to an end, rather than a means to evade all ends and stifle the reflection of a life well lived. But who has time for reflection? We live in the fast forward mode. Like dogs at the track chasing a mechanical rabbit we race to keep up with the payments — gas, oil, insurance, maintenance, lease — on a vehicle which takes us to work so we can keep up with the payments on mortgage, telephone, electric, TV, heat.....

The poor dogs never catch the mechanical rabbit that leads the race and we — no matter how much overtime we work — never make enough to sit back in leisure and watch the dogs go round and round.

Race track owners have plans for all the money you and I will ever make. Which is why they persuade us to wager our savings on a 401k while the trade imbalance skyrockets and the national debt digs a hole to China. But who has time to speculate much less extricate from the webbing of globalized gibberish that

masquerades as editorial wisdom ala flat earth Friedman? It's not an accident that workers don't have time to think, let alone organize.

Workers from closed GM plants in Lansing are driving to work in Grand Rapids as former Delphi workers from Grand Rapids are commuting to GM plants in Lansing which, by the way, would have been a very "cool city", the first to mass produce the electric car, if General Motors hadn't killed it. Instead the brand new GM plant in Lansing is mass producing cross over SUVs which is like Philip Morris inventing a new brand for the coffin nail.

I want off the merry-go-round.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics a quarter of all work-related deaths last year were caused by highway crashes. Of course "work related" does not include commuters, it only includes truck and bus drivers, sales reps, police, and others whose work entails long hours of daily driving. For the rest of us non professional highway users, the leading cause of death by accident is not a slip, a trip, or a fall, it's a highway crash. The difference is, we are not, technically speaking, at work when we crash.

"According to the Federal Highway Administration, almost two-thirds of all highway fatalities are categorized as 'road departures,' as opposed to intersection or pedestrian accidents, an indication of tired drivers veering out of their lanes or off the road altogether." [*"America's Most Dangerous Jobs" Forbes, 11/16/06 -- Tom Van Riper*]

And what is the leading cause of death when an exhausted driver departs from the road? A rollover.

GM announced that it will voluntarily provide roll over protection on all vehicles in five years. Why not make vehicles that don't roll over in the first place? Because that would require a center of gravity that isn't four feet off the ground. Vehicles that don't roll over require aerodynamic designs which likewise improve fuel efficiency. No dice. We will continue to roll over like loyal dogs dedicated to pleasing our Mid East masters because a safe, efficient, zero emission electric vehicle is not what Americans want. Don't take my word for it, trust GM, the company that loses more American market share every year.

Forget all that, it's past, it's gone. Behind the wheel we all feel like lead singers. That's the magic. The predominant feeling of driving is characterized by the song, "My Way". My hands on the wheel, My foot on the pedal, and all the comforts of numerically controlled climate (including music) at My finger tips. The best defense is a good offense and the cliché carries over to the highway where the biggest consumption monsters self propel like mobile bomb shelters. But the *My Way Highway* leads to greater consumption which leads to more work which leads to treadmill fatigue which leads to "road departures".

Who's leading whom on this highway to hell?

It's all about control: control over choices, communication, political action, or the lack thereof. The masses are asleep at the wheel while the wealth they generated is transferred offshore and that troubling notion just crossed my mind like a Grateful Dead lullaby: "Two good eyes and you still don't see."

The plan to fail is a lucrative enterprise. No one could fail as successfully as GM-Delphi year after year without a plan to shelter assets overseas and break contracts — pensions, benefits, wages — in the US.

The argument that more concessions will make us competitive and thereby save jobs is baseless. The evidence is concrete: (1) Concessions never save jobs. (2) Bankruptcy is a bonus for inside players. (3) Free trade has its costs. (4) Not even flea markets are free from manipulation.

The demand for more concessions is a pattern that repeats across the spectrum of manufacturing, transportation, construction, mining, agriculture, and service. The employers want more and the neoliberals are dishing it up ala carte. "Work harder for less and we'll let you work longer." That's the *new* New Deal.

The nation that kicked off the struggle for the eight hour day is logging more hours than any modern industrialized nation on earth. Every household needs two wage slaves and every wage slave needs a vehicle to keep them on the treadmill. The turmoil is designed to foil collective action. The degradation of workers is not

natural, accidental, or unavoidable, it's a plan. Put the jigsaw pieces together and the picture is clear.

In 2004 the UAW Concession Caucus negotiated a supplemental agreement that cut wages in half, eliminated the pension, and reduced all benefits for new hires at Delphi. *Members were not permitted to vote on the deal.*

In 2006 the Con Caucus negotiated early retirements and transfers at GM-Delphi that accelerated the transition to a permanent lower wage at Delphi. *Members were not permitted to vote on the deal.*

In exchange for these sacrifices UAW members won the right to walk away without a fight. Ron Gettelfinger, the UAW president who delivered the passive cooperation of union members and paved the way for more concessions, is an invaluable asset to the corporations.

Here are a few more pieces of the puzzle. Federal courts have consistently protected accrued vested benefits of retirees under a union contract. Gettelfinger pushed through takeaways from retirees and then filed a bogus lawsuit against GM in order to set a legal precedent. The lawsuit was counterfeit because there was no conflict. GM and the Con Caucus had already agreed to take accrued vested benefits from retirees *who were not permitted to vote on the deal* and GM paid for the UAW's legal fees.

Now that the legal barrier has been removed, the Con Caucus is free to enforce the robbery of retirees in future negotiations. Pensions will be devoured by health care premiums and copays and retirees *will not be permitted to vote on the deal.*

Corporate moguls served by neoliberal ladies in waiting have plans for all the money you and I will ever make. They have plans to take away every goddamn nickel and dime.

Dave Yettaw, former New Directions leader and president of UAW Local 599, used to say, "The corporations are playing chess and the UAW is playing checkers." The company thinks three moves in advance and the ladies in waiting respond with, "What is your pleasure?"

The answer is always the same, "More."

The Big Three will demand two tier in 2007 under the cover of more flexible utilization of temps. The Con Caucus will promote this concession as "better than" what they led us to expect, and then claim we won "job security". Buyouts will spice the deal and accelerate the demand for temps. Members who think they have landed safely in retirement will stand by helplessly as accrued vested benefits are picked from their pockets. Retirees' hands will be tied because *they can't vote and they can't strike*. The endgame is right around the bend. Slow down, Casey Jones, slow down.

A highway paved with concessions can be fatal. Keep your eyes on the road and your hands on the wheel. Don't roll over, slow down.

(sos, gregg shotwell)

www.soldiersofsolidarity.com

www.futureoftheunion.com

www.factoryrat.com