

Live Bait & Ammo #169: A Union at the Crossroads

I remember my first job in a UAW shop. It was 1972. I worked at Kelvinator assembling refrigerators. After ninety days I was up to full pay and benefits. As soon as I got health insurance, I took a day off to take care of a medical problem that required a doctor visit. When I returned to work the next day, the foreman—a gargantuan bully with a flat top haircut, teeth like the grill on a '56 Pontiac, and a nose like a tomahawk—verbally abused me for calling in sick.

I asked to see my union steward. The foreman shut up fast and walked away. A few minutes later the union steward was in the foreman's face. I'd never seen anything like it. The bully was cowed. After that the foreman always treated me with respect, grudgingly, but respectfully nonetheless.

I was sold. Hell yes, I'll pay union dues.

When I met with volunteer organizers at Toyota in Georgetown, KY in 2004 they told me the main reasons that they wanted the UAW were: pension and health care in retirement, cost of living raises as opposed to profit sharing, elimination of temp worker status which they felt was abusive, and to protect workers from injuries on the job. All in all, what they wanted was power: power to demand just compensation, power to confront the boss, and power to control the pace of the work and the assignment of jobs. Like workers everywhere they were tired of getting bossed around and belittled. They wanted dignity.

The UAW struck out on all counts except safety. Union shops do have better over all safety records, but speedups and overloaded jobs have led to increased work related injuries in UAW shops which can disable a person for life. In the chase to catch up with Toyota's relentless pace, the UAW sacrificed what is most important: the power to demand not only a fair day's pay, but a fair day's work load. Life in a UAW shop is getting tougher on workers and easier on bosses.

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, the UAW has permitted the companies to expand utilization of temporary and flex workers. The definition of flex work is a union without a backbone. Flex workers are not only "at will," they are at the end of a whip. Temp workers defy the meaning of unionism. Temps pay full union dues but are denied the rights and privileges of first class UAW members because they don't acquire seniority, and thereby, equality.

In 2007 the UAW negotiated contracts with the Detroit Three which denied pensions and health care in retirement for new hires and instituted a malignant second tier wage. As Detroit native Paul Clemens noted in his book *Punching Out*, new hires can make more money gutting an auto plant than they can working for GM.

In 2011 the UAW swapped the certitude of cost of living raises for the hoax of profit sharing. Capitalists don't share profit with workers. Capitalism is based on the swindle of paying less than the cost of living for labor and awarding all excess value to the leisure class. The day workers share profits is the day traders on Wall Street are given brooms and told to sweep up on their way out the door.

What does the UAW have to offer a nonunion worker? The ten hour day?

Since the inception of company and union partnership, UAW members have lost not only job security and compensation, they have lost power. When a UAW member

goes to work on the assembly line, they don't know what time they will arrive home. The company can lengthen the work day in the eighth hour or send them home early with impunity. The company union partnership has two faces and one forked tongue.

The baseline driving need of workers —North and South— is power not kowtow. If a union wants to organize, leaders must demonstrate that workers can stand up to the boss and win. Under the direction of UAW President Bob King, the UAW slavers and slobbers to convince employers the union can help keep costs down and workers compliant. Rather than offer workers a practical solution (solidarity) to an urgent need (powerlessness), King appeals to management's conscience, which is like asking the executioner for a smoke.

Neutrality agreements between the union and the target company are King's preferred method of organizing. Neutrality agreements exchange power for pity. Not a very desirable transaction for workers under the gun of a multinational corporation armed with the power to hire, fire, and injure a worker for life.

The first thing the union gives up in a neutrality agreement is the right to strike. After that the boss writes the terms of indentured servitude and the UAW musters the consolation votes. King may believe his curtsy approach to corporate power will gain traction with workers in the South, but there's few things more demoralizing than watching rebels play golf with the boss, and nothing more insulting to southerners than suggesting that they are patsies.

After years of "jointness" —that peculiar alias of nefarious union-management partnership— the UAW has stripped autoworkers of every benefit that makes union membership worth fighting for.

King admits that if the UAW fails to organize southern transplants, the union's slide into obsolescence will avalanche. King has pledged international solidarity and made some flowery gestures of support to Korean temp workers. But there's a scrap in his neighbor's yard which gives him an opportunity to prove his mettle and win the hearts and minds of the unorganized here at home.

Electro-Motive, a Canadian company controlled by Caterpillar, has locked out Canadian autoworkers and demanded 50 percent wage cuts, elimination of pensions, and reduction of other benefits.

Where did they get the idea that shit would fly in North America?

The pressure on unions is mounting. Can the UAW organize militant support for brothers and sisters in struggle across the border, or will King partner with the economic terrorists at Caterpillar by organizing workers at the Caterpillar plant in Muncie, Indiana to work for less?

The UAW is at the crossroads of Fight or Flight. One choice makes all the difference.

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