

Live Bait & Ammo #124: If you want to Rise up from the Ashes

All this speculation about what the UAW is going to give up next neglects one well documented fact: the contract. The deal went down in 2007. It's over. Gettelfinger & Co. are sweeping the debris from the halls of infamy and locking the door on their way out. One doesn't need a bloodhound to follow the trail, it's documented.

The fact is, the UAW was marching sheepishly into a nonunion contract when Loud Dog Corker shot his mouth off and blew the cover. Now Gettelfinger has to act coy and say things like, "What's competitive?" [GM Chrysler seek Union Concessions, Joe Szczesny : Time: 1-30-09]

What's the point in playing dumb? The train left the station. While UAW members were busy splurging their "signing bonus", the carnies were pulling stakes from the tent. The deal went down. The prize is a union with less ferocity than a stuffed animal.

New hires were sold out so the Con Caucus could throw old hires a rabbit foot. The thirty-and-out incentive for retirees set new workers back thirty years. Turnabout is not only fair, it's inevitable. When the VEBA goes bust retirees will be rubbing the rabbit foot and looking for work.

How did we get fooled again?

We didn't. We know the truth, but like alcoholics we don't want to admit it. The government, the corporations, and the unions are working together to degrade workers. We don't want to admit it because such knowledge would demand action, and action would banish stupor, and stupor is our drug of choice. Every drunk has a rationale, however flimsy, and we, the union, have a history of flimsy excuses and weak choices.

We chose to buy-in to the dog eat dog system and abandon solidarity. We stopped bargaining for the common good. We stopped standing together. We traded jobs for wages and ultimately sold out the next generation for a sip of delusion—the delusion that capitalism would save us from the ravages of capitalism.

The buy-in was gradual and diabolically methodical. It started with something as simple and attractive as home ownership. My own hometown is a prime example.

In the Furniture Strike of 1911 the city of Grand Rapids was brought to a halt. One of every three wage earners was directly employed in the furniture factories. Hundreds more labored in shops that supplied the furniture manufacturers. After a long and bitter struggle the strikers caved. The furniture workers union in Grand Rapids never recovered.

Big Bill Haywood, a cofounder of the IWW, visited Grand Rapids during the strike. Two years later an article in the IWW house organ, *Solidarity*, by O.L. Wakeup (Organized Labor Wake Up) entitled "What's the Matter with Grand Rapids?" analyzed the strike. Wakeup asserted that one of the main reasons the strike was lost was because too many workers were home owners. They wouldn't risk losing their private property. They had an investment, a stake in the big tent of capitalism.

Grand Rapids did have the highest home ownership rate for a city of its size in the nation. Trouble was, the industrialists controlled the banks and the wages. The debt to income ratio was not only too high, it was adjustable. Mortgages had to be paid off or refinanced every one to three years.

After the success of unions in the Great Depression era, employers required new tools to tame workers. They didn't dig too deep to find their scheme.

The first rule of the street is: never fight a man who has nothing to lose.

The rulers made sure workers had something to lose. Workers were enticed by easy credit, and IRS deductions on mortgage interest and property taxes, to invest in homes. Later, new tax deferred vehicles [401-k's] were devised to entice workers to invest in the stock market where value was directly proportionate to downsizing and outsourcing. We were cordially invited to buy-in and—in the interest of long term financial security—be partners in the business of exploiting workers.

Conflict is fundamental to change, but when we are mostly concerned about our individual economic security, rather than the security of our class as a whole, we are more likely to settle for the safe bet and the status quo. Hence, the conflict avoidance of buy-out is the preferred option. When you have investments in the stock market and a mortgage to consider, class conflict is out of the question. Social and economic security is perceived as an isolated, individual decision, not a collective one.

The latest Special Attrition Program [SAP] is a bludgeon. As factories close, the job bank is dumped, and the possibilities for transfers vanish, workers will have little choice but to cash in their chips because the Con Caucus does not have an agenda independent of the corporation.

Since the buy-in has collapsed, it only makes sense that we should now buy-out. Buy-out and go away.

Go away, quietly. Go away, powerless. Go away, helpless, isolated, declassified.

The bottom of each page of the SAP alerts the reader that the provisions are “subject to the terms and required approvals and certifications set forth in the Loan and Security Agreement entered into between GM and the United States Department of Treasury”.

They're all in on it: union, management, and government. The new management style is an update of the old fashion—whip the horses and call in The Guard. The latest capitalist disaster doesn't alter the corporate agenda, it accelerates implementation. It wasn't always this way.

The sitdowners of '37 were not invested in the capitalist system like we are. They didn't fight to preserve their investments. They fought for power—power for the whole working class.

Admit it. The UAW is not a force to be reckoned with today. Everyone with seniority is headed for the door. They think they can buy out as easily as they bought in. They don't understand that capitalism won't save them. They haven't been liberated, they've been exiled.

The UAW's slow slide into muddled irrelevance will never trigger resurgence. If you want to rise up from the ashes, you have to stand in the line of fire — like the sitdowners, like the civil rights marchers, like the many honorable men and women in our long history of struggle who died like criminals, so their children might live in peace.

GreggShotwell@aol.com

www.soldiersofsolidarity.com

www.factoryrat.com

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