

Live Bait & Ammo #104: Elections are not the Answer

In 1970 after a 67 day strike the UAW, under the direction of President Leonard Woodcock, won full Cost Of Living Adjustment [COLA] and “thirty-and-out” pension. Woodcock refused to submit the tentative agreement for ratification until all Local Union contracts were ratified. Eager to get back to production, GM buckled under the pressure. Local negotiations wrapped up quickly.

In 2007 after a two day strike the UAW, under the direction of President Ron Gettelfinger, gave up full COLA and abandoned pensions for new hires. Gettelfinger rushed the ratification and Local Union bargainers were stiff armed.

Under the leadership of Ron Gettelfinger Local Union negotiations were systematically stymied. In Lordstown the International UAW instructed the Local to stop negotiations. In Bowling Green management simply refused to negotiate with the Local Union because they knew the score: Gettelfinger would break Local Union resistance to Competitive Operating Agreements from the top down. Local Union bargainers don’t rank in the new union order.

Neither VEBA, nor two tier, nor the new attendance policy were ever discussed at bargaining councils or local union meetings. The solidarity busting “core/non core” was never heard before. We have a democratic process but an autocratic product. That’s the hallmark of the Concession Caucus.

Gettelfinger will impose the restructuring ordered by his bosses but Local Union officers will get plastered with spitballs, not him. The shopfloor is about to become a battleground. Maintenance and custodial jobs will be contracted out as will numerous skilled trades. All “non core” work from material handling to sub assembly will be degraded. Senior workers will be pushed and prodded to retire. Whoever remains will be targeted for replacement.

The Attendance Program will make target practice easy. There are “no excuses”. When changes were made to the attendance program under previous administrations, records were cleared. Everyone started clean. Under the Gettelfinger restructuring, records were not cleared. Everyone starts dirty or gets there fast. Local Union officials will have no say. They’re pawns in the game about to be swept off the board by an angry rank and file. But elections are not the answer.

The problem with unions is that the representational system has led workers to believe they can elect someone to take care of their business. Workers lose power in the transaction. In the Con Caucus grievance procedure the first thing that happens is that the business gets taken out of the grievant’s hands and transferred upstairs, out back, or off site. “Just keep doing your job. I’ll get back to you.”

The representational system binds the hands of the rank and file with red tape and rigamarole. If we want to protect ourselves on the shopfloor and reverse the destructive trend of the Con Caucus, “We will,” as Larry Christiansen said, “Have to organize the ground out from under them.”

There are some honest and well intentioned union reps. I’ve worked with some. But a Local Union official can’t accomplish anything without the active support of members. We can’t get our rate done early everyday and play cards under the boss’s nose, and then complain that the rep isn’t worth a shit when management raises the rate. If management increases the line speed and we deliver the extra quota of vehicles in record time, we can’t blame the rep for not defending us against speed up. We have to defend ourselves. A union rep without members who are willing to fight back is worth less than a rifle without bullets.

The following are personal examples of shopfloor tactics that won battles:

(1) — Management informed us at the last minute that third shift would have to work the Saturday after Thanksgiving. Anyone who didn’t come in would lose two days holiday pay. The committeeman, Jon Quellos, said we didn’t have time for a ‘get-back-to-you-later’ grievance. On his (you didn’t hear it from me) advice we all charged into the shift manager’s office and demanded he cancel the overtime. We couldn’t all fit into the office but we made our demand heard by raising our voices and pounding our hands on the walls. The boss decided it would be better if we didn’t work Saturday. No ‘get-back-to-you’ about it.

(2) — A coworker was fired unjustly. Production in the department slowed to a crawl. The union rep said that the boss “told me to tell you to get back to work.” He looked worried which we took as a good sign. Production ratcheted down another notch. Since the company had an open door policy, I requested that we be allowed to meet with the personnel director. I was told that only two workers out of the affected department would be allowed to meet with management. We all went to the meeting. There were about twenty of us crowded into the room. We blocked the exit. We did all the talking and we were talking down. Our coworker was reinstated and the offending supervisor was forced to go to charm school.

(3) — On one occasion I was suspended for disobeying a direct order. Management wanted to eliminate a lugger and I refused to help. The previous week I was given direct orders to do lugger work twice in one day. I complied, and requested call outs (Smile & File). The union rep informed me that a grievance would not be filed because I was not disciplined. When the grievance procedure failed to confront the crisis I was left with a choice: stand on principle or act like a scab.

In my book obeying an order to help management eliminate a union job is no different than crossing a picket line. I was walked out for balance of the shift and seven days. While I was out I continued to write flyers about the job fight and the flyers were distributed widely in the plant. Coworkers made a little donation box labeled “\$ for \$hot”. The next day the box was replaced with one twice its size. The next day it was three times larger. Management got the message I was on vacation. “Don’t Roll Over” flyers were plastered all over the plant. I was back to work in three days. We saved the lugger job. The union rep did a good job once we got the fire going.

(4) — I observed a coworker in dispute with a foreman. Naturally I sidled over to act as witness. Things got heated and the worker refused a direct order to move to a different job. As soon as the foreman left to call out the union and prepare to walk him out, I told my friend to quickly go to the job he had just refused. I called the union rep on a private cell phone. I explained that I’d documented the conversation. The union rep, Dennis Krontz, used the script to prepare the accused.

At the disciplinary interview the foreman made his charges. After the accused described his scripted version of events, the union rep called me in as witness. I corroborated my friend’s story, word for word, with three pages of neatly printed dialogue which culminated with the worker asking for a union call out and an end to the discussion before he was given a direct order. The foreman may have liked to dispute our version but he didn’t have a witness or written documentation to back him up. For the knock out punch, the union rep asked the supervisor where the disobedient worker was when he ordered him to come to the disciplinary interview. The foreman looked like he’d just stepped in a dog’s pile.

“You mean to tell me,” Dennis said, “That you took him off the job you ordered him to do, so you could accuse him of disobeying a direct order? Looks like harassment and discrimination to me.”

(5) — Management moved a coworker (Dennis Krontz, prior to union nomination) off his job preference as punishment for distributing an article accusing management of impeding production. The union didn’t do anything. Management gave me two disciplinary interviews for distributing literature as well. The union didn’t respond. In my interview I reminded the foreman that federal law protects a union member’s right to distribute union related literature. He said, “We are going to challenge that law.” We went straight to the NLRB and filed charges. Six union members signed statements asserting that they had seen supervisors confiscating our flyers. Management was forced to return Dennis to his job preference and post a notice admitting that union members had the right to distribute literature and that management did not have the right to confiscate our flyers. [NLRB Cases: GR-7-CA-46561-1 and GR-7-CA-46584-1]

(6) — In February 2006 WOOD TV News in Grand Rapids claimed it was my fault that Toyota hadn’t decided to build a plant in Michigan. The story was preposterous but that didn’t prevent the Grand Rapids Press from publishing my picture with the headline, “Did this Man Scare Toyota out of Michigan”. It was clearly an attempt to intimidate. The accusation was baseless and absurd but the unemployed in Michigan were feeling rather debased and unobserved themselves. When I went to work that night a security guard asked me if I was all right. I said, “I’m all right. It’s Toyota that’s scared.”

When I went to my machine a couple of skilled tradesmen were already there. “Your machine is down. You’re not working tonight.” The machine didn’t get fixed until I left the building. The entire line was shut down for the night. Shit happens. Sometimes so much shit happens it starts rolling back uphill.

So many people phoned and e-mailed WOOD TV to complain about the fake news story that they aired an interview with me the next day to make up for it. I got right to the point. “The Delphi bankruptcy is the result of fraud, mismanagement, and racketeering.” After all, that’s why they were trying to shut me up. I had nothing to do with Toyota or unemployment in Michigan.

One battle won’t win the war, but the struggle begins on the shopfloor. That’s the ground we have to organize out from under the Con Caucus. Want a real union? Back representation with direct action.