

Letters from US auto workers

15 October 2007

I just returned from the infantry in Vietnam, landed a job at the GM Stamping plant in Kalamazoo, Michigan, been married, had a son and bought a home on the GI loan when we went on strike for 67 days to land COLA (Cost-of-Living Adjustment) on our wages and 30 years and out at any age. I received \$25 a week strike pay and had to get food stamps. We won the strike.

When Owen Bieber became president of the UAW his first contract was concessions. I was on day shift and kept reading the “highlights” of the new contract and just decided it was completely wrong. I told the boss I was sick and left at noon. I drove over to Doubleday, a paper company close by, and bought a big white piece of hard thick paper and a marker and wrote “Vote No, Tell Bieber to go back to the bargaining table.”

I stood in front of the union hall and after awhile, the union folks inside asked me what I was doing. I told them I was just standing here with my sign just like they stand when they want to get elected. They went back inside and came out in a little while and told me it was against the bylaws for me to be on union property. I asked if I could stand by the road leading in and they said, “yes”.

I knew from the past how the union worked to get a contract passed. They would start on us little plants and then go to the big plants in Lansing, Flint, Saginaw, Detroit etc., saying the little plants voted “Yes” on it. By “little”, I mean that our plant had 3,000 workers.

I received tons of thumbs up with my sign from both shifts and when the dust settled, the contract was voted down. Although it was rejected the little union elite told me I wasted my time because it would have been voted down anyway. Then, I told them, I had done no harm and jumped in my car and headed home.

With the radio on I was just astounded when Bieber came on and threatened the workers with “a long strike if they did not pass it.” The contract passed after that.

That was when the UAW started crumbling apart.

New Directions started up and was big in Flint where I had to transfer after they closed the Kalamazoo plant I worked at for 24 years. I joined New Directions at Buick City in Flint. Trying to “reform” the UAW did not work.

When Buick City closed and I transferred to Orion Assembly in Pontiac, I had to drive 135 miles round trip to get my retirement time in. In Kalamazoo, I took a one-year educational leave to get two degrees at Western Michigan University and used up my GI Bill benefits. That did not count as a retirement year so I had to work 31 years. I stayed for a couple of more months to get anything from the new contract.

I retired at age 53 and I’m going on 61 now. GM has had to pay me full retirement and health care since I am too young to receive Social Security or Medicare. We had to go on strike for 67 days because a UAW investigation found out that autoworkers only lived an average 3 years after retiring at 65 years old.

Our wages kept going up because of the Cost of Living. I started out at \$3.57 an hour. In the summer at Buick City and Orion Assembly, they would hire union kids and kids in their 20’s at \$12 an hour. I was amazed when these workers told me that they could make it on \$12 an hour with no benefits.

I was on a fork lift truck at Orion and was just sitting on it by the line watching the \$12 an hour kids hustle on those cars with no problem. An old black foreman came up and said look at those kids do their jobs. I told him I could do that when I was 20 but I can’t do it now. I said I bet he could not do it anymore either. He shook his head, agreeing he could not do it anymore either. The young ones are just going to have to fight back with GM and the UAW.

I may just have to go to the VA hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan, like my grandpa did and my dad did.

DS

Perry, Michigan

12 October 2007

Having been a member of both the UAW and Teamsters, my opinion is that the rank and file workers will always ratify whatever contract is put before them if encouraged to do so by the union hierarchy. Although an increasingly enlightened group of workers rightfully feel contempt for the union and are against the terms of a contract, a majority is always economically pressured to vote yes on any contract offered.

Some years ago, I worked at a grocery warehouse for Eagle stores in Westville, Indiana. When the current contract expired (1984) we were told initially by the company that times were tough and there would be no raises for the term of the new contract. The union leaders — who I remember arriving in expensive cars and cloaked with gold rings and expensive watches — feigned outraged and encouraged a strike. We then took a pre-strike vote where the outcome was 100% in favor of a strike.

After letting the workers tremble in fear for a few weeks that they would be forced to live on the paltry strike pay, the union leaders came back to us with the “good news.” The company would give us a (insignificant) raise of 15 cents per hour (1.5%) for the first year followed by 10 cents per hour for each of the remaining two years. But there was a caveat. We had to also allow the company to bring in as many part-time workers as they wanted. Part-time workers were paid \$7.00 per hour as compared to \$10.55 for the full time workers and, of course, they had no benefits and no guarantee of work.

A few workers stood up and complained about the contract, but the union official advised everyone that it was the best that we could do and said the union encouraged it to be ratified. Being rather uninitiated in these types of things at the time, I thought everyone would vote to strike. Much to my surprise, the contract passed easily.

I remember thinking at the time that the union needed to increase strike pay to that of current wages or the majority of the workers would always be in a position where they felt forced to accept anything offered or face a looming personal economic crisis. At the time, I thought this was a serious technical flaw within the union that we needed to change. I now realize that pressure was the very intent of the workers being paid insufficient strike pay.

BM

12 October 2007



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