

Live Bait & Ammo: #129: Right Back Where We Started

Sometimes one can't see the precipice for the pitfalls. When you've lost a job or taken a steep pay cut; when your pension is threatened and your backup plan nose dives; when you're faced with foreclosure or stuck in an abandoned neighborhood; when your biggest investment in life just lost half its value despite all the time, love, money, and labor you put into it; when you're forced to relocate but can't afford to uproot; when you're too young for medicare and too old not to have preexisting conditions that exclude you from health insurance; when you've followed all the rules only to find that the rules have changed; when one or all of the above apply, it's understandable that you may cling to your private barrel of anxieties as the current hurls you down the Niagara.

Understandable, but useless. The barrels that we cling to—contracts, unions, pensions, promises, IRAs, VEBAs—will not protect us. Workers' rights are not defined by law or contract. Workers' rights are defined by struggle. Empty barrels won't protect us from the precipice, and there's no turning back.

The United States is not in a recession. We're getting "restructured" and "rationalized".

The good news is, the barrels that once provided an illusion of safety are smashed to smithereens. From the wreckage we can clearly see that either we all rise up together, or no one walks away with dignity, let alone a living wage. The good news is, no one—not the salary workers, the knowledge workers, or the retirees—will be spared. The carbon monoxide of 'Too-bad-for-them-but-I'm-okay' complacency has blown away. Catastrophe demands unity. The good news is, our history can lead us.

Money isn't lost, it changes hands. It's not a conspiracy, it's capitalism. The transfer of wealth from labor to capital didn't begin with the current crisis. We can trace it back to Caterpillar, Staley, Bridgestone, and every lockout since then. We can trace it back to the offshoring of steel, rubber, textile, and electronics; to restructured airlines that pilfered pensions; and PATCO. We can trace it back to narrow interest bargaining and lunch bucket politics that allowed the corps to pick us off, one isolated union at a time. We can trace it back to southern tenant farms and garment sweatshops in Manhattan. What's new isn't the method but the magnitude. All workers in all sectors are under the whip this time.

The Delphi bankruptcy characterizes the contemporary strategy and serves as a template for what the Detroit Three and subsequent industries can expect. Recently Delphi abolished health care and life insurance for salary retirees. The switch enabled the company to report to the SEC that it "swung to a \$566 million net profit from a \$577 million loss a year earlier" [Autobeat, 5/13/09]. Easy money. Unearned money. Lots of it.

Next, they will liquidate the salary pension. What's to stop them? Capitalism is the law.

GM and Chrysler may not achieve all their goals in the quick rinse bankruptcy controlled by the feds, but they'll be back in court to finish the job, just like Delphi. Observe how history repeats itself.

Base wages at Delphi were negotiated by the UAW in 2004, eighteen months prior to bankruptcy: \$14 per hour and no pension. Base wages at the Detroit Three were negotiated by the UAW in 2007, eighteen months prior to bankruptcy: \$14 per hour and no pension. One coincidence leads to another.

Each new UAW contract promises security in exchange for concessions from workers. The latest UAW Concession Con promised to deliver members from bankruptcy and plant closings. As soon as it was ratified Chrysler went into bankruptcy and announced more plant closings.

But the nail in the coffin is the agreement to settle the contract in 2011 by arbitration based on non union standards. That isn't a contract, it's a death warrant for the UAW. What could be more clear? The Concession Caucus has effectively decertified the UAW.

The union agrees not to strike and commits to a goal that nullifies any benefit to union membership. This is the price we pay for company stock in a VEBA? The UAW signs confidentiality agreements with the companies and leaves members in the dark. Read the actual contract language at www.soldiersofsolidarity.com.

Read it and weep. Weep for the unsung heroes who risked everything they loved in the depths of the Great Depression so the next generation might labor in dignity. Weep for the youngsters who tread in the footprints of the generation who chose to collaborate with management and sold their birthright for a bowl of maggots that the clipboards call joint programs.

Read it and revolt like the heroes of America's Civil Rights Movement who faced guns and clubs, police dogs and fire hoses, pimped out politicians, and judges controlled by cowards in hoods, so their children might live in dignity.

Read it and recognize that UAW members lost their voting rights.

We're right back where we started. Sometimes, where we started is the right place to be.

Recently my wife, Sheila, and I ventured down to the crossroads in Clarksdale, Mississippi for the annual Juke Joint Festival. Every year it seems there is one old standard that predominates, that bands play at every juke joint we frequent. Each year it's different. This year it was "Big Boss Man" by Jimmy Reed. Over and over again, we heard:

*You got me working, boss man / Working 'round the clock.
I want me a drink of water / You won't let me stop.
You big boss man / Can you hear me when I call?
Oh, you ain't so big / You just tall, that's all.*

The blues is essentially subversive. Every blues like every river has an undercurrent, a subtext, a baseline shackled to oppression and resistance. A song like "Baby Please Don't Go", for example, isn't just another song about love. It's a song about slavery and addiction; it's a song about poverty and injustice; it's a song about fear and violence and solitary confinement. And like every old blues, it's a song about the struggle, the struggle to be human in an inhuman world—like Detroit or Buffalo or Cleveland, North Carolina. Or a meat packing plant in Postville, Iowa that treats workers like animals, and where the feds arrest those workers under regulations as cruel and uncivilized as Fugitive Slave Laws.

We're right back where we started. The authorities turned fire hoses and police dogs on the children in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 and arrested them just like the police beat and arrested children trying to escape the textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912. The struggle isn't between North and South, black and white, native born and immigrant, it's between labor and capital.

When we try to take back what belongs to us, they will beat us and arrest us, and we will know exactly where we stand on the precipice.

The People's Summit

On June 15-17, 2009, the National Business Summit, sponsored by the Detroit Economic Club, will conduct business over wine and cheese at the Renaissance Center. Millionaire capitalists Conoco-Phillips, Dow Chemical, General Motors, Chrysler, Humana Inc., Ascension Health, Deloitte Touche, Tohmatsu, BNSF Railway Co., PVS Chemicals, as well as the presidents of the National Council on Competitiveness and U.S. Chamber of Commerce, will gather at this summit.

These wealthy businesspeople will strategize means and methods to increase their profits at the expense of the working class, and the growing millions living in poverty.

The National Business Summit will be held in a city with record high unemployment and poverty rates, layoffs, budget cuts, school closings, utility cost hikes and shutoffs and massive home foreclosures. With a registration fee of \$1,495, it is unlikely that any victims of foreclosures and evictions, let alone laid-off workers, will be able to attend the National Business Summit. No one at this event will be speaking in the interests of those most affected by the economic collapse.

The People's Summit will be a dynamic event. During the People's Summit, organizers will implement a moratorium on foreclosure evictions by going into the neighborhoods and supporting homeowners who are willing to confront the bailiffs. If there is a strike, demonstration or sit in, the People's Summit will join it. The People's Summit will confront the big-business CEOs and politicians gathering next door. **Join us! June 14-17, 2009 at Grand Circus Park in Detroit.** Four Days of Active Resistance, Political Discussion and Strategizing for a "**People's Stimulus Plan**" and an "**Economic Bill of Rights**" for **Working People and the Poor.**

I'll be there with you, one more soldier of solidarity who knows whose side he's on, Gregg Shotwell

For more information: Mobilization office, 5920 Second Avenue, Detroit, MI 48202
www.peoplessummit.org : Phone 313-887-4344 : E-mail moratorium@moratorium-mi.org
Endorse, volunteer, reserve your tent space and/or make a donation today!

GreggShotwell@aol.com

www.soldiersofsolidarity.com

www.factoryrat.com

Labor Donated