

Live Bait & Ammo # 73

While soldiers of solidarity chanted “Steve Miller’s got to go!” I chewed synthetic lasagna warmed to room temp. I didn’t eat anything that touched the meatballs—they looked like freeze dried Colorado oysters—and I eschewed the coffee which emanated an aroma reminiscent of high school biology class. A levy of polite manners subdued the normal aggressiveness of the free enterprise crowd but my appetite was in a self protective mode—wary and circumspect. I could have been described by security guards as the guy with “a small dark look in his face.”

While the corporati wallowed in the warm sty of mutual flattery, the industrial landscape of Detroit disintegrated all around us and a cold rain descended on the luckless and the damned. The third world status of Detroit’s inner city is emblematic of cities all over the United States. The deterioration is not accidental, it is not the by product of capitalism’s vaunted “creative destruction”. The destitution was engineered for a purpose: to control labor costs. Solidarity House is surrounded by sweatshops.

On the dais Miller appeared to be enjoying himself. In Steve’s World that’s all there is to enjoy. Despite our differences which are both wide and substantial, Steve Miller and I do have some points of agreement.

Point of Agreement #1: No partnership between union and management.

Unlike Gettelfinger who displays all the social movement of a chicken crossing the road (Must you ask why?), Miller makes no bones about the adversarial relationship between union and management. On October 8, 2005 Miller shot jointness right between the eyes. An obituary notice was nailed to the door post of every GM-UAW local union hall.

On March 31, 2006 when Miller petitioned the court to void the union contracts, I actually considered sending him a thank you card. Miller has done more to organize shopfloor resistance than anyone in the UAW.

#2: The problem isn’t globalization.

I agree. The problem is domestic. We have failed to organize and the litany of excuses can't withstand the scrutiny of history.

Was it easy when Walter Reuther got his head busted open at the Battle of the Overpass? Was it easy when he took a double barrel shotgun blast in the back? Was it easy when Victor Reuther was shot in the face and blinded in one eye? Was it easy for John L. Lewis to tell the Governor of Michigan that if he sent in the National Guard to oust sitdown strikers that "the militia will have the pleasure of shooting me, too."? It has never been easy. It has never been fair. The bosses have never been nice. We can talk partnership until the outhouse blooms roses, but it won't change the stink of the bastards in charge of our livelihoods. [Live Bait & Ammo #31: excerpt from a speech made at the 33rd UAW Constitutional Convention]

The UAW should have built a union hall across the street from every transplant in America. Instead we built a golf course at our Family Education Center in Black Lake, MI. Our UAW International reps have turned into caddies for "economic hitmen" like Miller, Wagoner, and Ford.

Miller said, "Globalization gets blamed for this outcome but it is only part of the story." The full story is, as Miller notes, less than 20% of the auto parts industry is organized. Only two of the foreign transplants located in the US are organized. Instead of organizing workers the UAW formed a partnership with the Corps. As a result, rather than taking workers out of the competition which is the goal of unionism, workers are subjected to "a competitive cost structure and modern operating agreements" which impoverish families and strip workers of their dignity.

Miller notes that transplants are competing "in our backyard with good pay and benefits and flexible work rules." He declares that "productivity has perhaps been more important than basic wage levels in overturning the established order." He conveniently ignores the enormous productivity gains of UAW workers. We make as many vehicles and/or parts as we did before with half as many workers. "Flexible work rules" is simply coded language for unrestricted authority to whip the horses, and purge solidarity, democracy, and equality from the workplace.

The competitive disadvantage of domestic auto makers in the US is a consequence of the UAW's failure to organize which begs the question: Why would anyone want to join a union that is partners with the boss and bargains for concessions?

If the UAW doesn't take a stand at Delphi, a stand that unites GM and Delphi UAW members and the broader community of uninsured and unsecured workers and retirees, the union busting plan embodied by Miller's brand of vulture capitalism will spread like an epidemic. Retreat is not an option when your back is against the wall.

3: Miller recognizes we need "Broader based health care programs."

I agree. Where we differ on health care is that for Miller it means transferring the cost from employers to workers. For soldiers of solidarity it means universal health care.

Miller said that when workers retired at "age 65 and then died at age 70.....the social contract inherent in these programs seemed affordable." In The World According to Steve, now that we stand a chance of actually enjoying our fair share of those benefits, it's unreasonable.

He explained that in the old days "employers passed along the costs to customers." But now "since their customers won't pay for it when they have choices," it's not viable. Miller asserts, "somebody has to pay" and it isn't going to be him and his gang of shrugging Atlases.

Miller's reasoning is fallacious. First of all, Toyota isn't selling vehicles cheaper than GM. So "choices" that customers make have nothing to do with health care or pensions. They make choices based on personal preferences, not an automaker's legacy costs. But more significantly, the customer is getting double billed.

As Miller explained, when the promises were made, the cost was shifted to consumers. Where is that money now? Rather than fulfilling their responsibility to retirees by setting the money aside in a trust fund, GM squandered it. GM like Delphi spent our legacy on assets overseas and extravagant compensation for

executives. Now Miller proposes passing the legacy cost on to taxpayers so that consumers will in effect pay for the same thing twice.

If taxpayers are going to get stuck with the bill, the investment should have a commensurate return, i.e., health care for everyone not just the privileged few. Furthermore, the return should ensure a level playing field for all employers. National health care is the only viable social-economic solution to the crisis in American industry and our communities.

If UAW members resist health care concessions and connect the struggle to all of the uninsured people in America, we may be able to leverage the automakers into support for national health care. The idea is not improbable. GM's 2004 annual report to stock holders stated: "...we need to encourage access to affordable healthcare coverage for all our citizens. It's simply not acceptable for over 45 million Americans to be without healthcare coverage. This causes a tremendous cost shift to those that do provide coverage, through higher bills to cover the costs of the uninsured."

Neither Delphi workers nor the UAW as a whole can succeed without broad public support. Such support will not come until the UAW is perceived as a partner in the pursuit of social and economic justice for all, not just their own members. The success of organizing in the thirties was due in part to the public's recognition that unions promote the common good. We will succeed in organizing and bargaining when the needs of the broader community dovetail with the goals of the union. Forty-five million Americans need our support.

The tide that raises all boats is social movement unionism; that is, a strategy of confrontation that links the struggle of one group with the struggle of all groups; a strategy of concerted activity that ensures a victory for one [GM-Delphi] is a victory for all; a strategy for striking action that rings the bell of liberty and justice in every American's heart.

Miller's attack is not confined to Delphi. His goal is the degradation of all working people. Miller insists we can no longer afford to pay good wages and benefits. Soldiers of solidarity see it differently. Our society can no longer afford extravagant rewards for fraud and incompetence. We can no longer afford to allow our legacy to be shipped overseas while our own citizens are deprived of a decent standard of

living, quality education, health care, and security in retirement. We can no longer afford to support vulture capitalists. We can no longer tolerate the bullshit that pervades The World According to Steve by Steve Miller.

(sos, shotwell)

www.soldiersofsolidarity.com www.futureoftheunion.com

Order your Miller Isn't Worth a Buck t-shirts at > GreggShotwell@aol.com