

Live Bait & Ammo #158: GM Gypsies & the Tentacles of Resistance

In October 2005 when Delphi declared bankruptcy and threatened to cut workers' wages by two-thirds, eliminate pensions and health care for retirees, on top of other radical hostilities, the International UAW didn't respond publicly or privately. We were under attack and there was no leadership to be found.

After Soldiers Of Solidarity formed to actively disrupt production with Work to Rule tactics, the International UAW responded by saying that they had a plan but they couldn't tell us what it was. They didn't want to reveal their strategy. Then they followed their usual drill and told us to vote for Democrats. Midterm elections were almost a year away. A political solution for our emergency was dead on arrival. They may as well have sent each local union a casket for their solidarity memorabilia.

We held our first meeting in Grand Rapids the first week of November, a month after Delphi's announcement of bankruptcy. By Christmas break the meetings had spread to Kokomo, Saginaw, and Flint. We held a demonstration at the Auto Show in Detroit and subsequent meetings in Lockport, Milwaukee, Dayton, and Youngstown in short order.

It was at the third meeting in Saginaw that we decided on the name Soldiers of Solidarity. The idea originated with Miguel Chavarria who wrote:

"We the People are at war. We need to develop Soldiers, not career opportunists. It will take time and patience, there will be set backs and victories. Given time and effort, the law of multiplication will prevail. If one goes out and trains two soldiers; and they go out and do the same, and this continues, we will have our army. We the People are the Union."

We felt like we were engaged in battle. We felt that solidarity was a practical solution to an urgent need and our best defense. We decided not to allow social differences or internal union politics to divide our struggle. As such, we decided against forming a caucus within the UAW which might become a platform for "career opportunists". We decided against any affiliation with a political party. We had one unifying purpose: defend workers' rights.

The rank & file audience ran our meetings. All speeches came from the floor. There was no authority higher than the members in attendance. We decided everything by consensus or vote.

Past history taught us that a vertical structure with totemic levels of authority would be too easy for the company and the union to topple. Leaders are targets. When the police asked us at pickets who the leaders were, we told them we didn't have any leaders. We didn't give them an individual to arrest, harass, and intimidate.

Likewise management felt the effects of Work To Rule—they paid sixty hours for forty hours of production—but they didn't know who to punish.

The UAW hierarchy was infuriated by their loss of control, but we didn't give them a leader to victimize or compromise. Our horizontal, decentralized organization made resistance impossible to stifle. Our best soldiers didn't wear identification tags. We were determined to fight back without getting fired or going on strike. On the outside, we would be right where management wanted us. We stayed inside and we stayed undercover.

David Cole—the son of a former President of General Motors, and the Director

of the Original Equipment Suppliers Association as well as a director of six automotive supplier companies, and thus apparently a less than objective chairman of the Center for Automotive Research—told the press that I was the reason that Toyota decided not to build a plant in Michigan. The Grand Rapids Press and a local TV station vilified me. It was a desperate act of intimidation on Cole's part.

When I went to work the following night my machine broke down. It didn't get repaired and running until I left the building. Not only was production halted, but every machine on the line that fed my machine went down and management paid workers to sit down.

I had nothing to do with it. I never touched the machine. It was down when I arrived. But management got the message: soldiers of solidarity fight back. Whenever a worker is attacked management will pay the price and soldiers of solidarity will determine how much the price is.

By February 2006 the conversation changed. Steve Miller the antagonistic CEO of Delphi was muzzled and GM started throwing money at the problem. Pension and health care for Delphi-UAW members was guaranteed. Early retirements and buyouts were offered. All Delphi-UAW members were granted top priority for transfer to other GM plants. Salary workers got screwed. They lost everything.

Hard core activists would have preferred a struggle to keep all the plants open, but the company undermined resistance by satisfying the primary needs of the majority of workers. More importantly a new generation of union activists was given a model for inciting resistance in a situation where the company and the union were united against the workers.

When workers at a GM plant in Lake Orion were threatened with a wage cut, they organized (with the help of old soldiers) a rally at the gates of the UAW International headquarters despite the fact they were laid off and thus not physically in contact with one another. They used social networking tools to throw together a picket. Gary Walkowicz and Greg Clark, two local union leaders who gained national attention for confronting the company and the union, spoke at the rally. Olen Ham, a GM-UAW retiree who was involved in the sitdown strike in Flint that won the UAW recognition from GM in 1937, also spoke to the rally.

It is vitally important that the rank & file jump to the defense of anyone who speaks on their behalf. GM and the UAW are anxious about the upcoming IPO of GM stock. They are ruthless in defense of profit and wouldn't hesitate to fire and/or intimidate an outspoken defender of workers' rights.

A new resistance is growing in the UAW. It's unclear what direction it may take, but the company and the company/union will have a hard time stifling the decentralized tentacles of resistance. Workers forced to relocate will join the growing ranks of GM Gypsies coming down the aisles with crowbars in their hands and vengeance in their smiles.

sos, GreggShotwell@aol.com

www.warriorsoflabor.com

www.soldiersofsolidarity.com

www.factoryrat.com