

A Voice From The Shop Floor

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Review of Greg Shotwell's *Autoworkers Under The Gun: A Shop-Floor View of the End of the American Dream* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011) 237 pp. \$17 (paper).

By Steve Early

The tradition of radical pamphleteering in North America is as old as Thomas Paine and his distinguished predecessors in the struggle for democratic rights in a world dominated by monarchs and theocrats. More than a few modern-day purveyors of “common sense” have penned their denunciations of the powers-that-be in rank-and-file newsletters, the shop-floor alternative to official labor publications. Their critique of the workplace status quo has been no less welcome than the writings of the immigrant corset-maker, who dared to challenge illegitimate authority, in England and its colonies, in the late 1700’s.

During his three decades as a machine operator in Michigan, Gregg Shotwell was never once asked to contribute to his national union magazine, *Solidarity*, which serves as a glossy mouthpiece for the United Auto Workers (UAW). So Shotwell, a brilliant wordsmith and working-class humorist, launched a lively shop paper called *Live Bait & Ammo* for the edification of his co-workers at General Motors and Delphi. It contained all the news and commentary that *Solidarity* didn’t see fit to print. Thanks, to the inter-net (and much to the chagrin of UAW leaders), *Live Bait & Ammo* was soon circulating in UAW plants far and wide. This made Shotwell widely read, if not very popular, at Solidarity House, the now sadly mis-named headquarters of a labor organization more devoted to dividing and conquering its own members than uniting them in fights against major employers.

Most edited collections of previously-published articles, on any topic, would be a pretty hard sell to a book publisher—even Haymarket Books with its hard-core readership of socialist activists and great back list of labor classics from Phil Foner, Irving Bernstein, Art Preis, and Sid Lens. Fortunately for rank-and-file readers, labor journalist Lee Sustar, who contributed an afterword to this anthology, and other friends of Shotwell understood the importance of *Autoworkers Under The Gun* as “an account of past labor fights” and “also an organizing tool for future battles.”

Re-packaged between paperback covers, the author’s urgent dispatches from the front lines of labor-management conflict are no less fresh than when they were first read by UAW members in auto plant break rooms, bathrooms, parking lots, and other places of refuge from the assembly line. As the late Jerry Tucker, a former UAW executive board member, notes in his introduction to this book, “the UAW has, during the past thirty years, presided over the most destabilizing job and income loss in our industrial history.” Its “forced march to the rear” has elicited the “organic, pained protests of individual UAW members and self-organized groups of rank-and-file workers” but few have matched the force and clarity of Shotwell’s grassroots “call for a democratic union and collective struggle against concessions and the culture of ‘jointness’ that envelops the UAW today.”

Not content to merely critique the shortcomings of UAW officials in our never-ending era of manufacturing give-backs, Shotwell also helped organized a protest movement called Soldiers of Solidarity (SOS). Neither summer soldiers nor sunshine labor patriots for sure, these UAW members vigorously objected to the union’s handling of the 2005 bankruptcy proceeding initiated by Delphi, a parts manufacturer spun off from GM. As Shotwell notes, the company’s court filing sparked a revival of grassroots activism—“not just among longtime militants, but among hundreds of workers new to union activity. Members of this SOS network soon found that they not only

had to confront an aggressive new Delphi management, but also had to pressure UAW leaders who were all too ready to agree to still more concessions.” One of the more interesting parts of Shotwell’s book is his detailed discussion of how working to rule might have been effectively deployed as part of a real campaign, based in the plants and affected communities, to defend jobs and past contract gains.

Shotwell’s account of autoworker lay-offs, forced transfers, reduced pension and health coverage, two-tier wages, and deteriorating working conditions makes for painful reading. “The corporations sense the labor movement’s weakness,” he writes. “They are determined to decimate and throttle the working class while we are down and in disarray...UAW strongholds have been strip-mined and abandoned. Union families have been severed from their communities, their history, their sense of belonging and continuity.”

Notwithstanding his understandable disenchantment as a UAW member, Shotwell knows that even a dysfunctional union is far better than none-at-all. In 2004, he travelled at his own expense to the Toyota factory in Georgetown, Kentucky at the invitation of workers trying to unionize their “Japanese transplant.” Finding these volunteer organizers to be “some of the finest, bravest, toughest union and men women” that he had ever met and the “real prizefighters of the labor movement,” Shotwell helped them rebut anti-UAW propaganda disseminated by union foes in Kentucky. Overcoming the “lies, manipulations, and fallacies” of open shop auto companies, in the south or anywhere else, won’t be easy, the author suggests. But “the truth hits you on the nose every day you go to work,” which is why, according to Shotwell, “there’s a fire that burns in the hearts of workers that can’t be snuffed out.”

(Steve Early is former organizer for the Communications Workers of America and a member of The Newspaper Guild/CWA. He is the author, most recently, of *The Civil Wars in U.S. Labor* from Haymarket Books. He can be reached at Lsupport@aol.com)

If you want to buy *Autoworkers Under the Gun* or other titles from Haymarket Press you can get a 30% discount by entering the coupon code HOLIDAY30. The sale is good through January 5.

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