

August 18, 2011

who we are and where we come from

At a time when unions are on the ropes and people question whether the labor movement will survive, it is prudent to reflect on who we are and where we come from.

At one time the UAW set the benchmark for working conditions in the USA.

In 2011 UAW members at Ford are the only UAW members who have the right to strike and therefore truly bargain.

The Rouge is a Ford Motor Company factory built between 1915 and 1927 on the Rouge River in Dearborn, Michigan.

It was the first manufacturing site that included everything needed to produce a car:

a steel mill, a glass plant, a power plant, auto parts, and an assembly line.

Over 100,000 workers were employed at the Rouge in the 1930s.

One might say, a river of humanity runs through it.

“I Am the Rouge” is the Working People’s Poetry Contest Winner of 2011

I AM THE ROUGE

Long hours in the factory
have transformed me.

I have become the assembly line
crawling like a centipede
through the concatenation
of time clock rhythms
and pneumatic sighs.

I whisper and hiss,
clang and grate,
squeak and groan.

I am the song of tired bones and
worn out shoes on concrete floors.

I am the dream of youth forsaken.

I am the sprocket of fear

I can’t escape.

I am the teeth in the gear.

I am the cog, the shaft, the wheel
of the conveyor.

I am the block and tackle,
pulley and cable.

I am the hourly drone
of monotonous doom.

I bow to the Madonna of Machinery
whose nipples are like grease fittings,
whose crankcase is a womb.

I am the fire in the foundry.

I am the pit.

I twist nuts, shoot screws,
and spit rivets like slang.

My fingers are pliers,
my wrists are wrenches,

my fist a stubborn
ball peen hammer.
I am the numb brain
and the long drive home.
I am the lone neon sign
blinking in the dark rain
-- Last Chance -- Last Chance -- Last Chance --
My eyes are tail lights fading in the distance.
I am the strain in the torsion bar.
I am the harness.
My arms bear the scars of my labor
like randomly tattooed emblems of honor.
I have become the soul of production,
the powertrain of perpetual motion,
the chassis of suspended mobility.
I am the thunder in the die,
the blue flame of the weld,
the fume in the lung of the painter.
I am a centerless grinder,
a lathe, a drill.
I am tinnitus, carpal tunnel,
the copper coil of repetitive trauma.
I am the key in the ignition,
the spark plug,
the throttle.
My blood is thicker than oil.
My saliva more toxic
than cutting fluid.
I am the heart of the engine,
the phallic piston,
the cam of accelerating continuity.
I am the hub
of mechanical wisdom
and spiritual ingenuity.
I am steel toed, hard headed,
and hydraulic.
I lift and crank and twist
and laugh at pain.
I am the still point of torque.
I am the fender, the axle, the bolt
in the tie rod.
I am the strut and swagger
of the driver
as he pops the clutch and
pushes the pedal to the floor.
I am the grumble of the muffler.
I am the Rouge.
I was here, Mr. Ford,
before you were born.
I will be here, Mr. Ford,
when you
are a long time gone.

Gregg Shotwell

