

## Read it and Revolt

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by Susan Rosenthal

**BOOK REVIEW:** *Autoworkers Under the Gun: A Shop-Floor View of the End of the American Dream*, by Gregg Shotwell. Haymarket (2012).

Between 1998 and 2009, autoworker Gregg Shotwell fired a series of shop-floor bulletins at the corrupt heart of General Motors and its junior partner, the United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy.

With passion, wit and humor, Shotwell exposed how General Motors (GM) stole American workers' pensions, slashed wages and shed jobs to finance new factories overseas. GM then declared bankruptcy and closed plants in the US, abandoning its obligations to the thousands of workers who had made it a global player.

Bankruptcy was basic to GM's business plan, forcing union concessions, attracting billions in government bailout money and aiding the offshore transfer of GM assets. GM currently builds more than nine million vehicles a year in 35 countries. Shotwell writes,

“Many workers were deceived into thinking that buying America would save jobs. All it did was divert anger and make believe that foreign workers – both inside and outside US borders – were the enemy.

We bought American and the Corps bought whatever they wanted in Mexico, Europe, Asia and Latin America with profits earned by American workers. Foreign workers didn't steal our jobs. The bosses exported them.”

Shotwell's *Live Bait and Ammo* bulletins did more than expose these crimes, they urged workers to revolt against the theft of their wages, jobs, pensions, benefits and dignity.

### **UAW, Inc.**

GM's anti-worker “restructuring” relied on support from UAW officials, and *Live Bait and Ammo* called for rank-and-file rebellion against this treachery. Accused of dividing the union, Shotwell replies, “I didn't say anything that they didn't already know in their hearts.”

In *UAW Incorporated: The Triumph of Capital* (2010), Thomas Adams documents the transformation of the UAW from a membership-driven labor organization into a capital-driven, business organization.

Shotwell brings this betrayal to life. *Live Bait and Ammo* reveals how GM pumped millions of dollars into the pockets of UAW officials under the cover of “joint funds.” Fully one-third of UAW officials are financed this way. In return, UAW Inc. systematically dismembered and gutted the union, abandoning autoworkers, their families and communities.

The collusion between UAW Inc. and GM reached new heights in 2007, when GM shed its medical benefit obligations by *promising* to transfer billions of dollars (that had been earned by workers) to UAW Inc. in the form of an employee benefit trust fund (VEBA). Because the solvency of the VEBA depends on the continued profitability of the company, “the UAW has become a full partner in the exploitation of workers.”

You expect the boss to shaft you. You don’t expect your union to stab you in the back.

In the past, the UAW set the standard for raising workers’ conditions. Now it’s leading the race to lower the bottom. Shotwell can’t find enough insults for the traitors who transformed a once-proud fighting union into “the enforcement arm of management.”

“The UAW is a one-party state, hard-wired to undermine solidarity, corrupt good unionists, and defend the corporate agenda. If we mistake [it] for a legitimate union with workers interests at heart, we’ll be led to the slaughter like sheep who are sheered before they are butchered.”

## **Moving forward**

Does this mean we are back to square one? Not by a long shot. Hard-won lessons become ammunition for more effective struggle. Shotwell concludes:

“There is no middle class and no lower class in America. There are only workers with decent jobs, and workers who don’t have decent jobs. Those who do hold decent jobs are only one catastrophic illness, one plant closing, or one indefinite layoff from destitution.

The mantle of middle-class status presumes a degree of security and upward mobility that does not exist. The notion of safety, draped like the boss’s arm around one’s shoulder, is based on the premise that hard work pays off and loyalty is rewarded.

The middle-class dream is as dead as the deer that I see spattered on the highway everyday... There is only a working class, and we – however special we may feel – all work in the same demoralized place, under the same relentless pressure to sacrifice our lives for the success of a godless corporation.”

*Autoworkers Under the Gun* offers many valuable lessons:

- that the siren song of “labor/management partnership” spells the death of genuine unionism
- that the only say workers get is finding more ways to deepen their exploitation
- that what’s good for management is death for workers
- that “helping the company compete” means putting your head in a noose
- that concessions kill jobs
- that companies profit by gutting their workforce

- that shared sacrifice is never shared
- that the promise of home ownership, 401K investments, medical care and old age security is a vanishing mirage
- that money is never lost – it only changes hands
- that predatory capitalism will steal everything you ever earn.

Now we know that bosses will scheme to put union bureaucrats in their pockets and make them tools of management. Now we know that self-serving union officials will betray their members and castrate their unions in exchange for company bribes.

Now we know that government, corporations and union heads collaborate to degrade the working class.

In every bulletin, Shotwell insists that the battleground is the shop floor, not the bargaining table; that we get only what we fight for; and that any goal short of victory for all is an injury to workers everywhere.

## **Show the boss who's boss**

I reserve the last words for Brother Shotwell:

“The sitdowners of ‘37 were not invested in the capitalist system like we are. They didn’t fight to preserve their investments. They fought for power – for the whole working class.”

“When our brothers and sisters are laid off, we should refuse as much overtime as possible. No more favors. No more rush jobs. Workers rule when they work to rule.”

“Work to rule is a method of slowing production by following every rule to the letter... Work to rule is an invocation for workers to govern collectively, to control the conditions of their labor... When workers work to rule, human rights take precedence over property rights... [w]hen workers work to rule, the bosses find out who really runs the plant, who keeps the machines humming, production flowing, and the money coming in.”

“We’ll get change when we break all the rules that keep us chained to the heart attack machine that cranks money out of poverty, illness and war. We’ll get change, real change, when workers lead the way.”

“The only real security is solidarity... If we fail to act collectively, we will be picked off separately. Solidarity is not an ideal; it’s a practical solution to an urgent need.”

This book will stoke the fire in your gut.

Read it and weep. Read it and revolt.

**Read the inspiring story of how autoworkers fought to build the UAW in the 1930s:**  
[Striking Flint: Genora \(Johnson\) Dollinger Remembers the 1936-37 General Motors Sit-Down Strike](#)

Popularity: 1% [?]