



Community View

Blame auto woes on lack of vision, not workers

BY PHILLIP BANNOWSKY • DECEMBER 14, 2008

As the doors slam shut on Newark's Chrysler Assembly plant, from which I retired in 2001, the workers file out one last time to the hoots and jeers of columnists, senators and talking heads, blaming them for the Big Three crisis and calling for an end to their unemployment protection, benefits and decent wages.

This contemptuous scarcity of vision will sink the middle class and wreck America's ability to build a green and prosperous tomorrow. These reactionaries, who only a few weeks ago were waxing all gooey about fakers like Joe the Plumber, are waging class war against real workers about their wages.

Eight hours on the assembly line means more work -- more blood, blisters and bruises -- than almost any other kind of labor.

It yields a gleaming miracle of rubber, fabric, steel and locomotion, as well as the machinery for tomorrow's production. It creates, in a word, value.

Thanks to the United Auto Workers union, workers got a piece of that value, about \$28 per hour; add a third more for health care, supplemental unemployment and the pension fund, and you get some 8 percent of the vehicle's price.

Now, nobody buys a car when they're fired, furloughed or can't get a loan because bankers blew other people's money on unregulated credit default swaps.

The same geniuses who cheered deregulation spread lies about \$70 autoworker wages, calculated by dividing all the costs of current and retired autoworkers by the hours of current workers alone.

By these calculations, when Newark Assembly is reduced to one floor sweeper, he or she will be earning almost as much as a CEO for AIG.

When AIG came begging to Congress, they got socialism for the rich. For playing by the rules, autoworkers get primitive capitalism: Bankrupt auto makers break union contracts, trash pension and health-care commitments, and sabotage the American Dream for all who labor.

America is in desperate need of jobs, clean energy and a new transportation system.

A vision to fulfill these needs has been outlined by the Center for American Progress, whose former Executive Vice President Melody Barnes will lead the new White House Domestic Policy Council.

Retrofit buildings for energy efficiency, expand mass transit and freight rail, construct a smart electrical grid, build wind turbines and solar collectors, develop advanced biofuels. So who will do that job?

According to labor activists Jane Slaughter and Mark Brenner in December's Progressive magazine, today's autoworkers will do it, just as they created the "Arsenal of Democracy" during WWII.

Autoworkers built airplanes, gliders, generators, bombshells, locomotives and railcars to equip the Allies and help save the world.

auto makers built no cars from 1942 to war's end, but made profits, paid wages and prepared the post war boom.

Current automotive models won't vanish overnight, given today's infrastructure of suburbs and freeways.

Bridge loans are essential to ensure auto plants and workers are around to do tomorrow's job as soon as feasible. Rusting factories and a scattered workforce will build nothing.

American workers have been devastated by the North American Free Trade Agreement, Central American Free Trade Agreement and primitive, trickle-down capitalism.

We have been divided by immigration status, race, gender and region. Union sympathizers are fired, and envy is incited against the organized.

Crushing concessions have been forced on the UAW, including slashing wages to half for new hires and absorbing an underfunded retiree healthcare plan.

With over 5,000 workers at times in Newark Assembly, the plant's closing is the death of a city, a city of millwrights, assemblers, Rebels, Yanks, immigrants, politicians, poets, mothers, prayer meetings and elections. Think of 3 million auto and related workers who may lose their jobs if the industry goes down. Think of a thousand cities laid waste if we fail to act.

While we hope for a visionary partnership with decision-makers, a fight back is gathering.

This past Monday, an "Autoworker Caravan" arrived in D.C. Lead by UAW activist and leader Wendy Thompson, the Caravan calls for a national industrial policy and single-payer health care.

Even more dramatic is the United Electrical Workers sit-in at Chicago's Republic Windows and Doors plant, which shut down this week when its creditor, the 25 billion dollar bailout-recipient Bank of America, cut off funds, including severance and vacation pay. Illinois is bailing on business with B of A and even Barack Obama has offered encouragement to the workers.

Vision, more than encouragement, however, will be required to satisfy the waves of desperation and revolt sweeping America.

The transitioning administrations must approve the bridge loans, cancel plant closings, and put in an order for wind turbines and rail cars by 2010. Restore the equal-pay-for-equal-work rights of autoworkers and protect their pensions and healthcare.

Back union rights from Alabama to Colombia to the chicken plants of Delaware.

With their contempt for productive labor, the moneychangers wrecked the economy. With our vision, solidarity, and industry, we will rebuild it.

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