

Live Bait & Ammo # 43: Work to Rule is Power

One of my favorite movie scenes is from Norma Rae. She asked the union organizer if it was true that Jews were different. He said, "Yes." She inquired, "What makes Jews different?" He replied, "History".

Our history makes us unique. There are people who don't want us to know our history. They want us to believe history is about millionaires and kings, not the struggles of working people against millionaires and kings. There is power in knowing our history.

The history of our struggle for justice is old as pharaoh's tomb. The ancient Hebrew word for strike is *regiah*, the laying down of tools. You don't think the ancient Jews were trade unionists? The Lord commanded, "Keep holy the Sabbath." Jews interpreted that to mean – "No work". You can bet your holiday pay that wasn't management's idea.

African Americans were masters in the art of worker to worker communication. Hundreds of years ago they used songs to instill solidarity, convey messages, and control the pace of the work. The song raised the collective consciousness of workers. The boss couldn't punish someone for falling behind or working too slow because everyone worked at the same methodical pace. They protected the elderly, the injured, the lame, and preserved strength and solidarity with song. The song not only controlled the pace of production, the song also communicated to workers important information. For example, the location of the boss. Such information allowed workers to take breaks, steal much needed supplies—food, medicine, tools, weapons— or even to escape. (Today we use text messages)

The slogan "work to rule" has a double meaning. Work to rule is a method of slowing production by following every rule to the letter. The aim is to leverage negotiations. Work to rule is also an invocation for workers to govern collectively, to control the conditions of their labor. Work to rule means power to the people.

Work to rule is an in-plant strategy, a method of influencing negotiations without going on strike. Workers follow the boss's orders but do nothing on their own initiative. They keep their knowledge and experience to themselves, defer all decisions to the straw boss, and let the pieces fall where they may.

Work to rule has roots to an article by Frank Bohn printed in the IWW newsletter *Solidarity* in 1912. Bohn wrote: "Sabotage means strike and stay in the shop. Striking workers thus are enabled to draw pay and keep out scabs while fighting capitalists."

Historically, sabotage did not mean destruction of machinery or property. The word sabotage "was first used officially by French labor organizations in 1897". The French word *sabot* means wooden shoe. The term sabotage originates from the French expression "Travailler a coups de sabots," meaning "to work as one wearing wooden shoes," that is, slow and clumsy. In the 1915 pamphlet, *Sabotage*, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn wrote, "Sabotage is not physical violence; sabotage is an internal industrial process." [source: *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology*]

In the 1930's union members occupied factories. The sit down strikes were illegal, but there is a higher authority than the bossing class. When workers work to rule human rights take precedent over property rights. In the 1930's workers claimed ownership of their jobs and stared down the barrel of a gun to win union recognition.

Why shouldn't we occupy plants? Why should we walk out on the jobs that belong to us? Why should we allow the boss to give our jobs away? Whole communities have been destroyed by ruthless owners. We have a right to defend ourselves. The struggle of the bossing class against the working class is about control of production and corporate manipulation of supply. The name of the game is Monopoly not free enterprise.

Management thinks they control the plant with their clipboards, portable phones, and panties twisted in a knot. But when workers work to rule the bosses find out who really runs the plant, who keeps machines humming, production flowing, and the money coming in.

Why should workers increase productivity when only the least productive, management, are rewarded? Why should labor sacrifice? There's a solution to overcapacity: a shorter work week. There's a solution to concession bargaining: work to rule.

In the 1980's Jerry Tucker, a UAW Servicing Rep in St. Louis organized a work to rule campaign at Moog Industries, an automotive parts supplier. The recession coupled with Reagan's

antagonism toward unions incited a relentless drive for concessions. Workers needed a new strategy to combat the tactics of heavy handed union busters.

Moog was profitable, but the company wanted to take advantage of the trend and demand concessions. They hired one of the most expensive union busting law firms in St. Louis. The legal vultures expected the union to go out on strike; they were prepared. Instead, union members voted the contract down and decided on an in-plant strategy – work to rule.

They continued to work, but without a contract the gloves were off. Workers have a federally protected right to “concerted union activity”. They have a right to seek redress for grievances, but without a contract they do not have a collaborative commitment with management to resolve the conflict. Instead of following an orderly grievance process, workers confronted the boss en masse. Chaos ensued.

Whole departments shut down while workers argued in the boss’s office. They “ran the plant backwards.” They didn’t damage equipment but they wreaked havoc with production by following all the Process Control Instructions to a T. Without a contract they were free to engage in “concerted union activity” as they saw fit. Everyone refused overtime. It was all for one and one for all. Disciplinary action of an individual crashed into a wall of mass resistance. The in-plant strategy succeeded.

All concessions were rolled back and all discharged workers were reinstated and made whole. Jerry Tucker helped organize five other UAW work to rule campaigns in the 1980’s. They were all successful. In an era when concessions were the norm and union busting was in vogue work to rule empowered workers with the tools to fight back and win.

The bossing class has perverted the traditional meaning of sabotage into malicious destruction of property. They must have looked into their own souls for the new definition.

When bosses order us to pass along substandard quality, it is, by their own definition, sabotage. When Ford designs vehicles that roll over or blow up on impact, it’s sabotage. When GM sells out, shuts down, spins off, and thereby guts the city of Flint, it’s sabotage. When Delphi builds all its new plants outside the US while closing American factories, it’s sabotage. When CEOs layoff thousands of workers and reward themselves with multi million dollar perks, it’s sabotage. When the President of the United States commits soldiers to war under false pretenses, bankrupts the treasury with lavish rewards to his cronies, and encourages a trade policy that exports American jobs, it’s not patriotism, it’s sabotage.

Workers are not saboteurs. Workers want to build, not destroy. Work to rule simply means: to rigorously adhere to Process Control Instructions and strive to meet the stated goals of high quality, lean inventory, and just in time delivery in order to compel “cooperation” from the boss. Working to rule is like keeping kosher – a strict code of law.

In May 1902 kosher meat prices in New York City jumped 50% in one day. Jewish women walked into kosher butcher shops, picked up the meat, and dropped it on the floor. They didn’t loot, they didn’t steal, they didn’t destroy property. The owners were free to dust off their product and put it back on the shelves. But the meat was no longer kosher, it was trayf, unfit to eat. No one would buy it. Prices returned to normal the next day.

Kosher laws like ISO Quality Programs rely on a collaborative commitment. Kosher has no meaning outside a working relationship. Kosher like “Quality” is not a label, it is a living agreement that promotes the highest standards.

By exporting jobs, laying off workers, and passing along shoddy products, management commits a lethal act of sabotage, violates the ethic of work, and betrays the relationship that upholds quality, production, delivery, and loyalty.

Labor creates wealth, bosses exploit it. Labor builds community, bosses prey upon it. It’s time for labor to let the feces fall where it may and traitors be exposed where they lie.

There is power in knowing our history. There is power in our fingers, power in our knowledge, power in our skill. From the longshore to the teamsters, from the mine to the mill, from the warehouse to the clerk, there is power in our work.

