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Solidarity Prevails At Indianapolis UAW Local 23

The 650 members of UAW Local 23, a GM stamping plant in Indianapolis, have endured months of attacks by General Motors, a prospective anti-union buyer, the state and local governments, the UAW International's enforcement squad, and corporate-controlled media. All these forces with all their tricks ganged up on Local 23 in an effort to extort deep concessions – in fact, trying to break their Local. But the power conglomerate collided with an overwhelming force: rank & file solidarity.

The UAW International Concession Caucus had cut a backroom deal with GM and a non-union employer, J.D. Norman, that not only amounted to a fifty percent wage cut but an essentially non-union contract. The Local refused to hold a vote on such an outrage. The International, violating all legal union procedures, demanded a mail-in ballot that the Local could not oversee. On Thursday, September 23, 2010, the membership carried those mail-in ballots to the Union Hall. As each member voted they were given a button printed with consecutive numbers: material evidence of total votes cast. They pinned the button on their shirts, held the ballot just below their faces like a mug shot, then spoke into the video camera: “My name is _____ and I voted NO.” Four hundred and ten times!

JD Norman withdrew to his spider hole.

The Struggles of UAW Local 23

The Indianapolis Metal Fab plant was slated to be closed by December 2011 unless a buyer could be found. In May 2010 the local union leadership saw the writing on the wall. They organized a formal vote at a regular membership meeting per Article 19 Sec 3 of the UAW Constitution which forbids any UAW official from negotiating with an employer without first obtaining the membership's approval.

The membership voted 384 to 22 to uphold the master agreement which required any new buyer to abide by the existing agreement. They overwhelmingly rejected any efforts to renegotiate their existing contract. It is notable that over half the total membership attended the meeting and voted to honor solidarity and reject any attempt to undermine contracts at UAW plants doing similar work.

The UAW International Concession Caucus would not accept the will of the members. In violation of the Constitution, UAW-GM V.P. Joe Ashton and UAW Region 3 Director Mo Davison negotiated a giveaway contract behind the Local Bargaining Committee's back. The proposed contract cut wages in half and basically eliminated workers' rights on the job. The International felt confident they could bulldoze the membership with a scare campaign, and a fast track vote. They called for an information meeting on Sunday, August 15, 2010 and prepared their usual snow job.

The union hall was packed. The members listened respectfully to their chaplain's invocation. Then UAW International rep, Mike Grimes, stood to speak and was immediately drowned out by a chorus of voices from the floor. The crowd was not chaotic nor were there any threats of violence. They simply refused to let him exert authority over their local. They asserted with the full force of their vocal cords that the membership is the highest authority in the union and that solidarity trumps bureaucracy. Grimes asked if anyone wanted to hear his presentation. The members answered with a resounding “NO”. The UAW International officials left. Shop chairman Greg Clark received a standing ovation.

The prospective buyer, J.D. Norman, a 34 year old stock broker who fancies himself an industrial turnaround specialist, couldn't take no for an answer. His jaw was slavering with the aroma of GM contracts which would allow him to allocate as much GM work as he pleased to other plants, including his holdings in Mexico. As long as Norman had a UAW-label contract in his back pocket, GM was free

to outsource to him all the stamping work he could handle. He arranged for his own private information meeting with UAW members on Sunday August 29, 2010 at the Indianapolis Colts football stadium. Free refreshments and big smiles. Less than 80 people – many of them salary – showed up.

GM, Norman, and the UAW brass pulled out all stops. Despite pressure from the Chamber of Commerce, corporate controlled politicians, and a vigilante media, the members of Local 23 held their ground. The Enforcement arm of Bob King's Concession Caucus then tossed out the UAW Constitution and the Local Union By-Laws. They called for an information meeting on company property and a ratification by mail-in ballot that would circumvent the Local Election Committee. The Enforcers must have taken a page from a union-buster's manual.

The Local 23 Election Committee, which must organize and certify all local votes in accord with Local Union By-Laws, issued a written statement to the membership that they had not authorized this vote and they would not in any way certify its result. They declared the ratification illegal and they devised their own solidarity strategy.

The Local organized to certify its own vote in its own way. The membership was asked to bring their mail-in ballots to the Union Hall to be videotaped and numbered, one by one, before mailing.

410 members certified their no vote at the Union Hall. The International Con Caucus had no choice but to report a proper count: 457 NO, 96 yes. Solidarity beat the company, the corruption in our union, the government, and the corporate media – three times in a row. They can hear Local 23 now!

A Rising Tide of Anger Points Toward 2011

What does Bob King's backflip into the swamp of concession bargaining at Indy Metal Fab bode for next year's negotiations with the Big Three? What can we all learn from Local 23?

UAW Region 3 Director Mo Davison told the Indianapolis Business Journal he believed the Indy Metal Fab plant “could go from about 640 hourly workers to more than 2,000 under Norman.”

Where did Mo expect 1,360 jobs were going to come from? From other UAW plants. Unlike Walter Reuther who said, “We must take labor out of the competition”, Bob King strives to force workers into competition with each other. If Local 23 had folded under the pressure, it would have set a new lower standard for UAW wages across the board.

The UAW brass have conflicts of interest. For instance, they manage too much corporate stock which funds the retiree healthcare trusts. They must make workers sacrifice, so the stock goes up!

When UAW members at the GM parts plant in Saginaw rejected a concession contract in June 2010, the enforcement arm of King's Concession Caucus worked hand in hand with management to threaten and intimidate members into a ratification that cut their wages and gutted their futures. Then the Cons helped broker a deal that sold Saginaw Steering Gear to a finance company controlled by the Chinese government. The lesson was not lost on the four remaining GM parts plants who still retain the right to strike in 2011.

Last year Ford workers refused to buckle under and ratify a contract that would have erased the power to strike and hence the power to negotiate. Ford workers and GM parts workers are holding on to their trump card with all their might.

UAW Local 23 demonstrated time after time, challenge after challenge, that solidarity, not law, is the hammer of justice. Let it ring!

This bulletin is put out in the interests of informing workers and renewing the fighting power of organized labor. Please send your comments and your on-the-job, on-scene reports to:
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