

Workers Will Rule When They Work To Rule

--from a speech made at Labor Notes Conference, 5-8-06

When Delphi declared bankruptcy, threatened to cut our wages 60% and dump our pensions, the UAW International said, "We have a plan. We just can't tell you what it is." We couldn't wait to find out. A rank and file movement—soldiers of solidarity—sprang up from the grass roots. Now sparks of resistance in the form of solidarity committees are flaring up like brush fires all over the midwest.

We've held meetings and protests in Grand Rapids, Flint, Bay City, Saginaw, Lockport, Milwaukee, Dayton, Kokomo, Troy, Youngstown, Toledo, and Detroit. Offshoot groups inspired by SOS have organized in St. Louis and Peoria. In every meeting we have asserted, "This is not just about Delphi. This struggle is a fight for the dignity of all workers."

If Delphi is permitted to shelter assets overseas, and use bankruptcy courts to break union contracts and dump responsibility for retirees onto taxpayers, all the multinationals will follow suit. Bankruptcy isn't just the latest trend in the land of Casino Capitalism, it's a union busting plan. It isn't just about the money, it's about control over the conditions of our labor. It's a battle to determine who will rule the shopfloor. If we don't gang up and beat this bully, we will one day hear workers say, "If only the UAW had called a national strike at Delphi, we wouldn't be so weak today."

We commonly hear rank and file members say, "A general strike is needed." The rank & file doesn't need convincing, they need organizing. The biggest obstacle to the general strike is not worker apathy it's union bureaucracy. We are not only fighting the Goliath of corporate domination, we are also fighting Goliath's ugly sweetheart, the company union. We are struggling to free ourselves from the harness of a company union, and the bridle of cooperation with the corporate agenda.

How can we empower our fellow workers, not with rhetorical slingshots, grand theories, and political pie in the sky, but in the most fundamental way and in the most fundamental place, where we live and work every day?

Sam Gindin once said, "If workers don't believe that change is possible because of their experience in the union day to day, forget about politics."

Politics is the cart. Work is the horse, the driving force. If we can empower workers where they live and work every day, then and only then, can we organize a real resistance, a real union, a real social movement. Then and only then can we—as Jerry Tucker said— "Put the backbone back in the UAW"

If knowledge is power, what is it that workers know better than

anyone? The answer is simple: work. And the conclusion is clear: work to rule is the fundamental building block of collective action.

Work to rule is not a political theory, it's a power tool. Workers may not understand Marxism but they understand tools. And they understand what Ani DiFranco meant when she said, "Every tool is a weapon if you hold it right." Work to rule is not a political doctrine, it's concerted activity and it has multiple meanings.

First and foremost, work to rule is a method of controlling production, of slowing down, of showing the boss who's boss. The aim is to leverage negotiations and/or prepare for a strike or other collective action. But work to rule is also an invocation, a sort of call and response for broader and more direct confrontation because it raises workers' consciousness of the power they hold in their hands.

The old UAW had a culture of struggle, a tradition of direct action. I hired into GM and joined the UAW 27 years ago. I didn't know much about how unions worked. I soon learned. At 6:30 one morning we were sitting around sipping coffee and dressing out our grinders. A foreman who was new to the area told us to "Get up and get to work, right now." He said, "I'm the boss."

We said, "Yes sir, boss." And we went right to work. Thirty minutes later every machine in the department was down. Then skilled trades came out, tore the machines apart, left everything all over the floor, and went off to look for the missing parts. They didn't come back. There was no production that day. Every department behind us went down like a domino.

The next morning that same foreman said, "Good morning, gentlemen." Then he got the hell out of there and left us alone.

Workers controlled the shopfloor. The shopfloor was our turf. We didn't plan this direct action. We didn't even talk about it. It was automatic. We didn't call it work to rule. We called it, "Show him who's boss." That's what the old timers taught me about unionism.

The UAW cut its teeth on slowdowns. The UAW was born in conflict not collaboration. The UAW Concession Caucus intentionally emasculated the militancy of the UAW rank and file. The Concession Caucus promoted competition between workers and cooperation with the bosses. The Concession Caucus promoted alienation from workers in other countries and partnership with the company. When the Concession Caucus promoted "Buy American" all they did was provide cover for the corporations to invest our legacy overseas. Instead of promoting international solidarity, they promoted teamwork with the bosses and we, the workers, are the losers. We don't need collaborators, we need soldiers of solidarity who are willing to defend their turf. Soldiers who believe that we are worth fighting for.

When workers work to rule they assert the power of their knowledge and skill over the means of production and its owners. When workers work to rule human rights takes precedence over property rights. We can't begin to organize a general strike or even an industry wide strike until workers actually experience first hand the power of concerted activity on the shop floor.

Work to rule is not simply a method of slowing production, work to rule is a network of communication, a coded language of subversion. I don't tell workers to slow down. I say, "Give them what they deserve. Break the record."

African Americans were masterful in this art of communication. Hundreds of years ago they used work 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 have more sophisticated means of communication. We have the internet. We have cell phones. But the object is the same: raise the collective consciousness. Working to rule is an underground network of communication. A network above and beyond, below and around, the control of the company or the official union.

Last February a protest was planned at the Delphi plant in Flint but the night before union officials with the help of the local television and newspapers called it off on account of rain. SOS went on alert. Our song traveled via internet and cell phone. We sang, 'Soldiers of solidarity don't melt in the rain.' We showed up. We picketed the plant and dominated the media with our message. "SOS is ready to strike." "SOS won't back down." "Soldiers of Solidarity don't melt in the rain." You can bet the rank and file took note of the difference between SOS and union officials.

Work to rule is also about workers exerting power in their own union.

When I went to Lockport, New York some workers asked me how to make a motion at a union meeting. I thought to myself, 'We are far down the learning curve here.' At the next meeting they went in with a plan and passed motions for full disclosure of all changes in the contract and at least a week between the information meeting and the ratification. The importance of

that action was that they took control of the union meeting from the floor, not the podium.

On March 31 a supervisor at the Delphi plant in Flint informed Claudia Perkins that she was laid off.

“You must be out of your mind. I will be here Monday,” she said.

Claudia called her Bargaining Chairman.

“Are you aware my seniority rights are being violated?”

He admitted he was aware but insisted he didn’t know what to do because the International hadn’t returned his call.

“Do you know how to write a grievance? Because I know how to sign one. I will hit the clock on Monday.”

On Monday forty-five workers who’d been laid off hit the clock and refused to leave. They sat down and got their jobs back.

The Civil Rights Movement wasn’t organized from on high. The march on Washington was built step by step; by a woman who said, I’m not giving up my seat; by young men who sat at lunch counters and endured physical, emotional, and psychological abuse; by an old woman who after a long day at work said, I’d rather walk than take that bus. Those people led us to Washington in 1963. Those small but enormously courageous actions were the building blocks of the Civil Rights Movement.

Our goal in Soldiers of Solidarity is long term and far broader than one plant or one company or one union. This isn’t just about Delphi. Delphi is the harbinger. The vulture capitalists want to steal pensions, cut wages, slash benefits, and bust unions across the board. They won’t be satisfied to stop at Delphi. Delphi’s just a donut shop on the highway to Armageddon. SOS advocates that workers in all sectors assert their power at the point of production, stoke the brush fires, and reinforce the rank and file network of communication as a first step in the process of broad collective actions that directly confront Goliath, his ugly sweetheart, and their government bodyguard.

The fact is, we occupy the plants, the fields, the docks, the offices, the roads, the ships, the airways, every day. We’ve established a beachhead. But a general strike will not be organized from the top down. A general strike can only be organized from the ground up. Work to rule is the building block. Work to rule raises the individual worker’s awareness of his or her power to control production and inflict maximum damage where it counts most—the bottom line. Work to rule fosters and reinforces the network of communication, the bonds of solidarity, necessary for broader collective action. Work to Rule is about controlling the work and directly determining the conditions of our labor.

When I am asked, “What can we do to support Delphi workers?” I say, “Organize your own workplace because Delphi isn’t just a company name, it’s a code name for a SWAT team coming to you on a fast train.”

The workplace, not the bargaining table is the real battle ground. We can’t beat Goliath in the courts. We can’t beat Goliath in the back room. We won’t beat Goliath in the election booth until we beat that bully on the shop floor.

Staughton Lynd, an attorney known for his civil rights and union activism, attended our SOS meeting in Youngstown, Ohio. Afterwards he remarked to Tony Budak that what impressed him most was that no one was running for office. No one was using SOS as a platform for their personal political ambitions.

SOS is a rank and file movement. SOS doesn’t believe that if we elect a hero, he will save us. We are not hero worshippers. We understand that real unionism springs from the bottom up, and dies from the top down. We do not advocate replacing one puppet with another puppet. Changing the guards won’t change the prison. SOS advocates that workers themselves become the leaders we have always been looking for and that we lead from the ground floor not from the top floor.

My old friend Dave Yettaw, said, “You can defeat a leader, but you can’t defeat the idea.” To which I might add, you can defeat a leader but you can’t defeat the rank and file when they lead the battle. Workers will rule when they work to rule.

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