

LABOR PAEANS—September 2006

(published by *FORsooth*, newspaper of Louisville chapter of F.O.R. [Fellowship of Reconciliation])

At Ford Quality is Job One--Minus the Job

by Ira Grupper

“The sun never sets on the British empire” was a saying used to describe its worldwide piracy. But the sun set on that empire, as it did on the Roman, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and so many other inhumanities.

Within the U.S. sultanate, the current big holder of the wage-slave whip, General Motors has been the exemplar of corporate capital control, as in the old saying: “What’s good for General Motors is good for the U.S.A.” But private enterprise can’t breathe unless it expands, and so if you look under the hood of a “made-in-the-U.S.A.” car you will see parts from all over the world.

And, now, General Motors, Ford and Chrysler, the Big Three “U.S.” automakers, are in deep trouble—foreign small cars are in, gas guzzlers are walking the plank. Thru merger, and otherwise, if they are American, then they are also European (Daemler-Chrysler, not Chrysler-Daemler). And now, shiver me timbers (for you who are under age 60, it means “holy defecation”), they may soon be dancing to the beat of Japanese, Korean and French batons. Bilge-sucking has gone global.

Here in Louisville, Ford Motor Company’s two factories, the Louisville (Auto) Assembly Plant and the Kentucky Truck Plant, announce six and five week layoffs—part of a national plan “...to slash fourth-quarter production by 21 percent, or 168,000 vehicles, to reduce mounting inventories... Next month, Ford is scheduled to announce details of its restructuring plan, which could call for more permanent job cuts.

“...During the second half of 2005, company officials said several times that they were working on a plan that would involve cuts because Ford had more plants than its sales justified.” (*Courier-Journal* 8.19.06).

“Reduce mounting inventories” is the key phrase. Now, I aint nothin’ but a retired unskilled factory worker, but let me throw somethin’ out to y’all. What if—what if—each company did not secretly compute and estimate future sales and thus plan production segmentally? What if these buccaneers all joined forces and did it together—for the public good?

To answer this we have to know how Mr. Wilson, then the CEO of GM, responded to the chair of a U.S. Senate committee, many years ago. The latter queried declaratively, as in make-small-talk first: “And General Motors is in the business of making automobiles.” Whereupon Mr. Wilson, in an unguarded paroxysm of candor, responded: “No, senator. General Motors is not in the business of making automobiles. General Motors is in the business of making money.”

We have to know this to understand that when the ecstasy of corporate greed meets the agony of worker future employment uncertainty—a crisis results.

The seven assembly plants and seven parts plants Ford plans to close will disrupt the lives and livelihoods of more than 35,000 workers. As the old Wobbly poem puts it:

We have fed you all for a thousand years
And you hail us still unfed.
For there's never a dollar of all your wealth
But marks the workers dead.
We have yielded our best
To give you rest
And you lie on crimson wool.
And if blood be the price of all your wealth,
Good God, we have paid it in full.

But, not to worry. Companies take care of their own. Northwest Airlines is laying off a whole bunch of its loyal employees in its move out of bankruptcy—never mind the workers' bankruptcy.

“To help prepare employees for possible job losses or transitions, Northwest sent out a 165-page handbook titled ‘Ground Operations Restructuring Q&A and Employee Support.’ ” (Michelle Singletary, *Washington Post* 8.24.06). In its section, “Coping With Job Loss,” NWA lists “101 Ways to Save Money,” to wit:

“Buy spare parts for your car at the junkyard. Get hand-me-down clothes and toys for your kids from family and friends. Take a shorter shower. Buy old furniture at yard sales and refinish it yourself. Volunteer two hours a month at a food-sharing program to get reduced-cost food. Hang clothes out to dry. Borrow a dress for a big night out or go to a consignment shop. Ask your doctor for samples of prescriptions. Don't be shy about pulling something you like out of the trash.”

Northwest CEO Doug Steenland, and others, apologized, after the fact, for their insensitivity. So now I am completely relieved that corporate decency has returned to its high integrity level, once again.

But there are, dear readers, decent human beings who have walked the earth. One of them was a dear friend and colleague, Victoria Gray Adams, a leader, in the 1960's, of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). African Americans were at that time not allowed to join the racist Democratic Party of Mississippi, so the MFDP was created.

Sister Gray Adams was also the first woman to run for U.S. Senate. She was from a small hamlet near Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where I was a civil rights worker in the 1960's.

Her life was one of dignity, resistance, compassion, dedication. Please allow me to include the following, which I wrote to Sister Vicky on June 5, soon after we surmised that she would not live much longer:

“Do you remember when you and I stood in front of a large audience to pay tribute to the memory of that amazing sparkplug of the Hattiesburg movement, Johnnie Mae Walker? We were in New York City (or was it Washington DC?) and Johnnie Mae had recently passed. We were at a meeting of the National Committee for Independent Political Action. How elegant you were then, and now.

“I’ll be in Philadelphia MS in two weeks, attending the 42nd annual commemoration of the martyrdom of Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman. And I know you will be standing tall at our side. Bless you.” Victoria Gray Adams was 79 years old when she passed.

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July-August 2006 Newsletter

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