

## **NEW BOOK HAS CHAPTER ON REGION 5 NEW DIRECTIONS MOVEMENT**

# **Taking On General Motors**

by  
**Eric Mann**

**(A Case Study of the UAW Campaign to Keep GM Van Nuys Open)**

*Ed. Note: Since it first began in 1982, the Worker-Community oriented Campaign to save the GM plant in Van Nuys, California has been an inspiration to all workers seeking economic justice in this period of harsh adversity. Author Eric Mann, himself a member of UAW Local 645, tells the story honestly and eloquently.*

*At the UAW's 1986 Constitutional Convention in Anaheim, he witnessed the events surrounding the Region 5 Director's election and met many of the delegates and supporters of the region's call for New Direction. The following is from the new book.*

## **Building Regional Movements in the UAW: The New Directions Movement**

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The New Directions Movement is one example of an encouraging regional model of UAW insurgency. In 1986, a group of local leaders in Region 5 (the UAW region representing 75,000 UAW members in eight South Central states, including Missouri Oklahoma, Louisiana, Texas, and Kansas) organized the New Directions movement. They disagreed with what they believed was the union's concessionary strategy and the lack of democracy in the region —initiating their movement out of a directly felt need more than a coherent philosophy or strategy.

They decided to challenge the incumbent regional director, Kenneth Worley. Their view that they were mounting that challenge "within channels" was reflected in their choice of incumbent assistant director, Jerry Tucker, a fourteen-year veteran of the International staff, as their candidate to run against Worley. Their slogan, "Justice, Not Just Us," reflected their concern with greater solidarity between white and black workers in the region in which racism was still quite overt, and with greater solidarity among individual locals in order to reverse the company practice of whipsawing local against local.

Their movement was based on more than a critique; it had an impressive track record. Under Tucker's leadership, many of the locals had waged resourceful struggles to resist concessions, such as the 1984 UAW campaign at LTV-Vought, the aerospace firm in Dallas-Fort Worth. In that situation, the company demanded concessions in an attempt to provoke the union into a lengthy strike, with the hope that the financially drained workers would return in a more pliable mood.

Tucker and the local union leadership countered with a tactical plan they called "running the plant backwards." They used work slowdowns, mass grievance filings, passive resistance, and other forms of "in-plant strategies" to involve hundreds of new workers in the process and wear the company down—choosing to use the strike weapon on their timetable not the company's. Finally, a one-day strike in June 1985, as the culmination of more than a year of organizing, forced the company to back down. None of the management's concessionary demands was imposed.

With their movement rooted in successful rank-and-file resistance, the New Directions delegates went to the June 1986 UAW convention in Anaheim, California with hopes of electing Jerry Tucker. At a convention that celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the union's founding, many delegates from other regions saw the feisty New Directions people as a harbinger of hope. Its top-to-bottom racial integration, and its call to once again confront the corporations made New Directions the talk of the convention. If Tucker could win, perhaps Region 5 could become a workshop for new strategies that could eventually impact the entire UAW.

When the election was held for Region 5, hundreds of delegates from other regions packed into the ballroom to watch the roll call vote—as if their own future was at stake as well. When the votes were finally

counted, Ken Worley was declared the winner over Jerry Tucker by an announced margin of 325 for Worley and 324.8 for Tucker—a difference of two-tenths of a vote.

The Tucker delegates contested the election results based on charges of irregularities. Tucker retained the services of attorney Joseph A. "Chip" Yablonski (whose father "Jock" Yablonski, a reformer in the United Mine Workers, was murdered for his efforts to democratize his union). After an investigation of Tucker's charges, the U.S. Department of Labor, according to Yablonski, found the following election violations in the Tucker-Worley race for regional director: several delegates who had voted for Worley had never been properly elected in their locals; two delegates who had voted for Worley received payments of approximately \$5,000 in UAW funds; and Jerry Tucker, after fourteen years on the staff of the International union, had been fired from his position as assistant regional director four days after he announced his candidacy.

The New Directions activists demanded a completely new election for regional director, including new elections for all convention delegates in the region. In many union reform movements, drawn out legal proceedings, even if eventually successful, often discourage the activists and lead to dramatic declines in organizing momentum. In the case of New Directions, however, a decision of the courts, their movement was, if anything, growing stronger. They were publishing an attractive newsletter with articles debating the union's future; organizing local officers to raise job security demands for the 1987 auto contract negotiations; and running slates of officers in virtually every local election in the region.

To its credit, their movement does not place undue emphasis on Tucker. It trains and encourages dozens of grass roots leaders, through programs such as all-day strategy workshops addressing union responses to whipsawing, concessions and plant closings. The New Directions organizers are developing an advanced model involving building a coalition of UAW locals in an eight-state region.

If the courts order a new election and Tucker is elected regional director, the character of the insurgent movement will have been transformed, in at least one region, from protest to program. The New Directions leaders will have the opportunity (and the responsibility) to try out new strategic approaches with which to confront the auto and aerospace companies. If new elections are not ordered, or if they are and Tucker is not elected, the New Directions people will focus their energies on the shop floor—and prepare for the 1989 UAW convention where the next regularly scheduled regional director's election will be held.

One possible program for a regionwide movement such as New Directions would be a campaign to make UAW Region 5 a "plant-closing-free zone." UAW locals in an eight state area could warn GM that any actions to close down a plant in their region would lead to local strikes and regionwide boycotts.

The prospect of UAW locals and community leaders in an eight state area engaging in *regional economic planning* and taking on corporations such as General Motors to achieve their objectives is certainly a long shot at this point in history. But, based on the successes and lessons of the Van Nuys model, it offers exciting possibilities. If New Directions adopted a "plant-closing-free zone" strategy and the idea took off, it could exponentially expand the impact of the Van Nuys movement—creating a true domino effect that could influence policies both of the International UAW and General Motors management.

In this context, the movement for greater internal democracy in the UAW assumes even greater importance. There is a crying need for an open and widespread strategic debate within the UAW as to its future direction. For many in the UAW, the most distressing development is not the union's orientation toward concessions, workplace cooperation, and protectionism, but its unwillingness to subject those strategies to widespread membership debate.

There is a great deal of enthusiasm, militancy, and programmatic initiative at the local level. The vast majority of dissident local leaders, while highly critical of the *strategies* of the international leadership, are offering their views constructively. Those views should be considered and debated, rather than suppressed, if a declining union with a proud history and a potentially proud future is to rebuild itself.

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