

# The Voice of New Directions



National Edition

APRIL 1997

*"If there is no struggle there is no progress." Frederick Douglass*

## Downsized at the Buick City Complex in Flint, Michigan

*a personal account by Dean Braid, Experimental Test Mechanic, UAW Local 599*

On Friday January 17, 1997 in Flint, Michigan, I experienced first hand G.M.'s ruthless quest for profits.

I had this experience when I and other UAW members in my plant viewed a pre-recorded satellite simulcast message which was sent out to all Michigan Powertrain engineering facilities. In the message we were notified our Flint engineering facility will soon be closed as part of a G.M. plan to consolidate it with Milford Proving Grounds, Pontiac Engineering and the Warren Tech Center. The consolidation will give the company a cost savings of maybe 8%, while disrupting thousands of families and the communities in which they live.

The reaction in the room was at first disbelief, but anger followed quickly. And as the full measure of what we heard sank in, the feeling of betrayal was overpowering.

One of my coworkers was forced to leave the conference room when he became physically ill over the announcement. The stress associated with the uncertainty of his future and that of his family was too much for his body to handle.

The shock that is being felt over the plant-closing announcement is magnified because our local membership ratified our new 3 year local agreement just a week prior to this news release. At the time, our Local 599 union newspa-

per printed on the front page that under the new contract management would be "aggressively seeking new work for the Flint engineering facility." This was supposedly part of the company's pay-back to us for cooperating with them in settling the contract. One more empty promise.

Since G.M. is always talking about the importance of quality, planning and product viability, it is interesting to see how these 3 issues had *nothing* to do with the company's decision to close our plant. The following facts show this clearly.

- Our engineering facility has been recognized because of the "World Class" development of the Buick V-6 series II engines and the Buick V-6 series II supercharged engines. Both of these engines have the unprecedented honor of being named two of the top ten engines in the world for the past 3 consecutive years.

- In 1996, the engines that we designed were in 60% of all G.M. passenger cars by volume. Our engines are now in 75% of all the vehicles offered by G.M., either as a standard vehicle package or as an optional engine package.

- Powertrain Engineering is just minutes from both the V-6 plant and Buick Final Assembly, thus reducing the time element to bring a concept into full production and keeping quality to a premium.

- Our facility is also the only G.M. Engineering facility that has so much incorporated under one roof. No where else in all of G.M. can engineers take an idea for an engine, experimentally test it and evaluate the engine as it is built at the V-6 plant and also watch final assembly in Buick City, all within a one mile radius.

Many engineers feel the consolidation of engineering facilities will hurt G.M.'s long term profits, because shorter engine cycle time development will not be possible. Currently Local 599 union leaders are pursuing an informational campaign to help save jobs at the Buick Engineering Center and the rest of the Buick City complex.

Many of the local's rank and file members are demanding an intensification of this campaign and also the chance to input more directly into how the job-saving fight should be waged.



*"Since we're all one big happy family here . . .  
Can I use the plant as collateral on my car loan?"*

## Editorial: A Call for Rank and File Dialogue

from *New Directions'* National Co-Chairs  
Suman Bohm, Pat Patterson, Elly Leary, Dave Yettaw

It is no news to anyone who is reading this that UAW members have been on the economic defensive for years now. But UAW members are not the only workers in trouble. The nation's economy, which is being led toward the 21<sup>st</sup> century by corporations that feel free to do what they want, is leaving more and more people in the dust.

A 1995 study by the Economic Policy Institute showed that the low-paying, no-benefits temporary-help industry accounted for 27.7% of the nation's new jobs. From 1973-1991, the child poverty rate rose from 14.4% to almost 20%. Today a young high-school graduate earns about 30% less than his or her counterpart earned in 1979.

These numbers are not empty statistics. They represent real people: ex-coworkers, neighbors, our own children. Yet while we and those we know suffer economic anxiety, there are those who do not suffer. Take Don Fites, Caterpillar's CEO, as an example. He has not suffered recently. From 1994 through 1996 while Caterpillar's workers were being brutalized by the company's requests for concessions, Fites' income rose from \$1.6 million to \$3.3 million. Not a bad raise at a time when others were suffering.

Such facts anger most UAW members. They make us realize that our willingness to work in good faith with the companies has been abused.

The companies promised us that economic concessions would help save UAW work, so we gave them concessions, and what we got in return was 760,000 lost jobs. The companies also promised that more union-company joint programs would help UAW members gain greater control over the workplace and therefore make issues like safety less of a problem. Well, the companies got their joint programs, but UAW members gained no significant control over the workplace. Instead, from 1980 through 1995 speedup soared, productivity rose by 105%, autoplant injury rates increased fourfold, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that more than one-quarter of all autoworkers have experienced a work-related injury. Meanwhile, we have unelected jointness appointees, over whom the membership have no control, making key decisions about workplace policies.

Brothers and sisters, is this really how we want our union to operate as we approach the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Many UAW members do not think so.

Like other unions in our country, the UAW is at a turning point in its history. No single leader nor any single idea can lead us forward; what we need is a *group* effort. Every time another UAW member loses her or his job, the pain of that job loss does not belong to just that one worker; the pain belongs to all UAW members and to the communities in which we live. And every time another new member is brought into our union at a second-tier wage, that economic inequality not only hurts that one worker, it also hurts all of us, since it symbolizes our union's growing inability to stand up for the principle of

"an injury to one is an injury to all."

The UAW is a big union with a long history. We are like a giant family with a lot of people in it. Like most families, when we are faced with challenges we discuss and debate our options. Such dialogue is good for us, it is the essence of democracy, it helps us to sort out what to do. Therefore, we must encourage such discussions at every level of the union: the shop floor, local union halls, subcouncil meetings, Soli-

darity House. We must analyze union policies and deal with the questions that are being asked by UAW members in our workplaces. Questions like:

- \* Are there strategies that have been used in other unions, but that the UAW has not used, that might help us strengthen the union?
- \* Do members have a right to know how joint funds are spent? Are there any hidden "extras" — lavish lunches, golf course fees, etc. — that those funds pay for?
- \* Do the UAW ethical practices codes — which mandate that all the union's "operations shall be conducted in a democratic and fair manner" — guarantee free speech to UAW members?
- \* How far should the union pursue the jointness idea? For instance, during the recent Johnson Controls strike, was it good that the UAW asked Ford's help in trying to organize the



# Daring to look reality in the face

An interview with Caterpillar worker Cameron Austin, Decatur, Illinois

*The Voice:* The strike against Caterpillar was called by the UAW in June 1994. It lasted 17 months. Then it was called off without a settlement by the International. How did that make you feel.

*Austin:* Upset like everybody else. But it made me remember that regular folks built this union and regular folks will have to rebuild it. No longer can UAW rank and file workers at Cat allow anyone to define what is best for Caterpillar workers — not the UAW leadership and certainly not Caterpillar. That determination rests with those of us who live on the shop floor every working day. This is true at Cat and it's true for all other UAW workplaces in the country.

*The Voice:* I know going back without a settlement was frustrating. How did the strike end up being lost?

*Austin:* One of the things that hurt us happened even before the strike started. I'm talking about jointness. It made the union soft. Cooperation and capitulation have the same meaning at Caterpillar, and at every other UAW facility too. We cooperated with the company for years, yet Caterpillar was prepared to replace every one of us.

For a long time Caterpillar claimed it wanted to partner with us, yet all the while they were preparing to attack us and destroy our union. And they're still doing it. In a spirit of cooperation, we gave them technical information about how to operate plant equipment and now Caterpillar intends to use that information against us. They plan to do this by giving the information to a new breed of industrial carpetbaggers who will take the information into Dixie, where they will use it to make products in low-cost non-union shops. All our years of dedication and skill will be given to non-union workers in Mississippi, North Carolina and elsewhere. So-called "cooperation" helped to set up this situation. It is time to tell the UAW leadership: *no more jointness!*

The truth is that in all UAW facilities, everywhere in the country, jointness has divided members and weakened our union. That impact may not be felt in Solidarity House, but it sure has been painful on the shop floor.

*The Voice:* The NLRB says that Caterpillar has committed hundreds of labor code violations, more than any company in U.S. history. What does this mean for Caterpillar workers at this moment?

*Austin:* Well, we are back to work now and Cat is making record profits off our misery. We must have patience and allow the NLRB charges to maximize pressure at Cat. There are so many complaints against Cat at the NLRB — over 500 of them — that the NLRB has had to handle them in stages. They've already decided on about 300 of them, and just about every decision went in



our favor. In this regard, we can be proud of the effort the UAW and its legal staff have put forth in hammering Cat on the legal front. The charges that have resulted from the union's work in the legal arena will continue to pressure Caterpillar.

However, those charges alone will not bring us victory. "Kicking the Cat" will require new strategies and a UAW leadership that heeds the advice of what the membership is saying here in the war zone.

*The Voice:* What exactly would the International find out if they listened more closely to the rank and file?

*Austin:* I already gave you one example before: jointness. People know that jointness isn't working. The International would understand this if they listened better.

Another example has to do with the strike and what happened afterwards. The International recommended Cat's last offer, but we didn't want it. We voted against the offer by a big margin, about 81% to 19%. In the largest, hardest-hit Cat plants — places like Peoria and Decatur, Illinois — the membership voted against the contract by an even larger margin, with more than 90% of them voting no.

Saying no to Caterpillar's last offer was an important victory for our membership. It showed our spirit and where our heads were at. The strength of the vote was a signal to the UAW leadership that Cat's offer would have to change drastically before it would be accepted as a reasonable settlement by us. Too bad the International did not listen. They sent us back to work anyway.

*The Voice:* What's the situation like now in the plants?

*Austin:* Strong members, who have fought many battles, have retired. Also, in general the number of members has

fallen off due to outsourcing and closing of plants, past and present. So Caterpillar has dug in for the long haul. With record profits and little activity from the UAW, the company is positioning itself for a long war. Cat is turning out products, members are working overtime, but discontent is everywhere.

*The Voice:* How do Caterpillar workers feel about the UAW?

*Austin:* We are proud to be UAW but we know that the union's strength comes

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### Interview

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from those of us on the front lines, not from anywhere else. And right now the front lines are under attack. Cat has every intention of being union free. They nearly said this straight out in one of their publications when they wrote that they wanted to "operate the business in such a way

that employees do not feel the need for representation by unions or any other third parties." When they wrote that, do you think they were writing about creating a utopia in the plants, or were they talking about filling the plants with a bunch of "cat crap"? You decide.

A victory at Cat is still possible but only if the UAW takes our struggle off the back burner and re-ignites the fight on the shop floor. This won't happen on its own. It will take the rank and file to pressure the UAW into re-arming itself.

*The Voice:* You've mentioned the need for new strategies more than once. What kind of strategies do you have in mind?

*Austin:* I think the UAW has to start dealing with the "work ownership" idea.

*The Voice:* Could you explain that?

*Austin:* The work ownership idea was carried to victory by the Canadian Auto Workers in their strike against GM last fall. Basically what the CAW was saying was that although the company owns the buildings, the workers and the community own the work, and therefore the union was going to fight tooth and nail to save jobs. So, while the UAW conceded tens of thousands of jobs during the last contract negotiations, the CAW fought for and won job protection and other innovative provisions. This happened because the UAW continued to follow worn-out negotiating policies and philosophies that were originally developed during the 80's recession economy. We need new strategies. At Cat we have to start saying, "Cat

owns the buildings, but we own the work!"

We must say "No!" to Cat on the issues of outsourcing, plant closings and runaway shops, and we must say "No!" to UAW leaders who try to get us to accept weak job protections. When Wall St. applauds UAW contracts, you know something is wrong.

We must not let Cat steal UAW jobs from us and our children and grandchildren. The idea of work ownership is nothing new. It is the whole purpose of union recognition and collective bargaining. The UAW was founded on the principle of work ownership. The union was founded on the idea that the companies were obligated to treat us fairly because we own the work that we give to them.

The UAW has to remember this and go back to its roots. We must force this issue with the leadership. We must be willing to fight for work ownership till the last dog dies.

### A Call for Rank and File Dialogue

(continued from p. 2)

Johnson Controls plant in Plymouth, Michigan? What does it mean when a union looks upon one of its major employers as its biggest ally during an organizing drive?

After the loss of 760,000 jobs, an epidemic of speedup in our workplaces, and a general weakening of our union, there is only one way for the UAW to rebuild itself. That is through an upsurge of rank and file creativity.

From the Flint Sitdown in 1937 through the UAW's historic participation in the civil rights movement, the union's greatest triumphs have always come at times when the union was embroiled in intense internal debate, with members emotionally analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of potential strategies. Free discussion and membership power made the union strong. The muffling of discussion and the disempowering of the membership can only produce the opposite results: not great triumphs, but a directionless union.

If we want to protect our jobs and our pensions, if we want to stand in solidarity with our laid-off brothers and sisters, if we want to protect our communities by building coalitions with the millions of decent people whose economic fortunes have worsened over recent years, then we must ignite discussion about the UAW's future in union halls across the nation.

As New Directions' co-chairs, we hold out our hands to you in solidarity. We want to work in coalition with you in order to start the dialogue that our union needs in order to rebuild itself. Join with other people in your locals to raise questions and put forward your ideas. Keep us informed about what you are doing. Tell us what you think we should be doing.

Together, we have to build a national movement for UAW reform. Thank you. *Solidarity!*

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UAW National Edition

NEW DIRECTIONS

The Voice of