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Betrayed Auto Retirees, Blue-Collar & White-Collar

Abstract

This article is part of the collection of writings of Mike (Marshall) Westfall, retired autoworker from General Motors in Flint, Michigan (1964-1994) and activist critic of the auto industry restructuring that led to devastating job losses. It originally appeared online in *The Westfall Papers*.
[<http://michaelwestfall.tripod.com/id125.html>, accessed 12/14/2011]

BETRAYED AUTO RETIREES, BLUE-COLLAR & WHITE-COLLAR

By Mike Westfall
4-19-2009

What is the true definition of the so-called legacy cost in the auto industry, and who is really picking up the price tag?

It seems that the defenseless auto retirees, both blue-collar and white-collar, who have dedicated a lifetime of difficult work putting America on wheels have become a scapegoat.

The media has reported regularly that the hard-pressed retirees' healthcare benefits are a primary reason for the downward slide of the domestic auto industry. They say if these benefits were reduced or eliminated that the auto industry could be automatically fixed. Is this so, or could it just be that these needy under appreciated retirees have been falsely and unfairly targeted?

Workers in these factories have trusted their employers, unions and government health and safety agencies to protect them from toxic chemicals, pollution and similar hazards of a lethal work environment.

Has this trust been deserved?

In the 1980's, I was the chairman of the UAW caucus in power at the largest GM truck assembly plant in the world. One of our union benefits representatives, who had written language for the national automotive agreements, would say in sarcastic gallows humor that he could tell what department a worker worked in by their death certificate. Each department had its particular set of potential health issues. Many times serious health issues, which occur from decades of workplace exposure to unhealthy work environments, do not surface until workers are retired. Depending on which plant or operation they worked, both blue-collar and white-collar auto retirees endured a working lifetime of exposure to lethal toxic health hazards unique to building automobiles.

That exposure included breathing paint vapors and solvents, the production and plating of die cast parts, welding fumes, foundry work, pattern maker carcinogen exposure, asbestos exposure, cutting fluids and many other potentially serious health dangers where identifiable toxic chemicals and/or carcinogens were present. Brake shoes, and clutch plates were regularly made from asbestos. In the automotive factories the heat pipes and water pipes were wrapped in deadly asbestos.

Cancers can have a long latency period. Many workers may not be diagnosed with cancer until decades after exposure and retirement. Before the 1980's, factory exposure to asbestos was especially high, and many of those workers at risk are now retired.

One cancer alarm was sounded in Detroit in 1979 when autoworkers raised concern about suspected excess cancer among woodworking patternmakers. The Journal of Occupational Medicine backed this up and reported that epidemiological studies have cited an increased risk of colorectal cancer among automobile pattern and model makers. There have also been very serious concerns expressed about automobile plastic operations. Confirmation from other related industries have shown that the resulting vapors and solvents used in plastics are linked to lymphatic leukemia.

Most automobile drivers are only in their vehicles for short periods of time compared to the autoworkers on the assembly lines who work around these trim materials every day, year after year, and they cannot roll their windows down to get away. The glues, solvents, carpet fumes, headliner fibers, door panel vapors and all the other odorous toxic- soup from thousands of ripe new cars rolling down the assembly line every week are all inhaled deeply into these workers' lungs.

Mike Bennett is the retired UAW local president of both Saturn in Springhill, Tennessee and UAW Local 326 in Flint, Michigan, which represented GM's now closed Flint Ternstedt Plant. The Flint GM Ternstedt factory did die-casting. Cancer was the priority worker issue at this plant. Bennett said this General Motors' factory had rates of lung cancer up to three times normal and that the UAW International Union and the corporation both ignored their responsibility to the young widows of the workers who died.

There is an abundance of other health issues; the auto industry is just the tip of this toxic iceberg.

Auto retirees are being falsely targeted as expendable legacy costs today. Their healthcare benefits were not a gift. They owned and paid for these benefits by wage diversions while working. Past union leaders negotiated these healthcare benefits because they knew of their tremendous life and death importance. These benefits are part of the collective bargaining agreement between the UAW and the auto companies and therefore legally binding. The government has no constitutional right to steal these benefits from the auto retirees, and UAW officials have no moral right to negotiate them away.

Since auto retirees own their healthcare benefits, top UAW officials had to go to court against their retirees to be legally able to negotiate the weakening of these critical healthcare benefits. Voluntary Employee Benefits Association programs, (VEBA) are sly ways for corporations to divest of their retiree healthcare obligations, and the UAW officials did not allow auto retirees to vote in the process. Top UAW officials and the auto companies together replaced the autoworkers' retiree healthcare benefit program in 2005 with a VEBA, which totally downgraded the defined retiree healthcare benefits program. It also reallocated the supervision of the healthcare benefit program to top UAW leaders.

Now the deceived auto retirees are faced with a company which no longer has direct responsibility for their healthcare, has a seriously under funded and questionable healthcare VEBA and is administrated by top union officials who have betrayed the trust of these retirees. Over the years top UAW officials refused to vest retiree healthcare benefits when they could have and should have. Instead they negotiated programs like the jobs banks, where since 1987 and for the next 22 years, they contractually forced auto makers to pay thousands of permanently laid off workers full wages. While it never created one job, it did create vast amounts of union dues. These workers were never going back to work, and those billions of negotiated dollars should have gone to reeducate workers for "real" jobs and protect and vest retiree healthcare.

These union officials also turned their backs on keeping up the retirees' pensions with inflation increases. This has resulted in the buying power of their meager pensions falling further and further behind. This very sad fact will deny auto retirees the ability to pay for their own healthcare benefits.

The dual standard and dissimilarity between the top union officials' pensions and common auto retirees' pensions could not be sharper, because the top union officials who agreed to the negotiating of the retirees' VEBA will retire on safeguarded generous pensions paid for by union dues.

The assault against auto retirees, both blue-collar and white-collar, by the very powers that should be protecting them, is a betrayal and a cultural tragedy. It is easy to make an honest case that auto retirees' healthcare benefits are being collectively stolen from them, when they need them the most. It is interesting that many of the insulated duplicitous governmental politicians, who have been using their political pulpits to crush the auto retirees' healthcare benefits, were the same politicians campaigning for healthcare for all Americans in the elections just a few short months ago. These are the politicians running our nation today. None of those clamoring to steal the auto retirees' healthcare were exposed to the toxic hazards that these retirees were exposed to, and none of their retirement benefits are on the line.

In conclusion, it really has turned into class warfare as the corporations, top union officials and politicians falsely and immorally have covered up the legitimate needs and rights of these blue-collar and white-collar auto retirees. The retirees didn't make the poor business decisions that the top executives did, but rather spent a lifetime working on difficult jobs, being exposed to dangerous toxic chemicals producing the vehicles and earning their benefits.

They now see the corporations where they worked for over 30 years, the union they supported all their working lives and the government they supported and paid taxes to, all turn their collective backs on them.

It has become a sad human rights story of America versus her beleaguered retirees.