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Historic U.A.W. Leader Speaks out for Retirees and Workers

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/id110.html, accessed 12/14/2011]

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HISTORIC UAW LEADER SPEAKS OUT FOR RETIREES AND WORKERS

WHITEY HALE / MICHAEL WESTFALL INTERVIEW

August 11, 2007

Whitey Hale is the retired President of UAW Local 326 in Flint, Michigan. He served in several high level union positions over his long union career. He not only was elected as president and chairman of UAW Local 326 but also was a national negotiator and a key national leader who fought for issues protecting retirees and workers.

Whitey and I have been friends and worked together for many years. We worked collectively on various issues, participated in joint TV interviews and worked in concert on rallies and other functions.

Whitey was a fearless Flint union leader without equal, and I am especially pleased to do this interview....M.W

MICHAEL WESTFALL: Whitey, I would like to welcome you and thank you for your participation in this interview. I have several questions to ask you. You have held several key positions in America's premier industry. Could you explain for our readers the various offices you held and just how these positions afforded you involvement within the UAW agenda?

WHITEY HALE: I worked my way up from alternate committee man for 3 terms, shop committee man for 3 terms, chairman of the shop committee for 4 terms and UAW Local 326 president for 3 terms. I spent 2 terms as a national negotiator and was elected chairman of the national negotiators. I served 2 terms as the chairman for the "COLA on Pensions" committee for retirees. I was elected 5 times as a national convention delegate, and I received the coveted Walter P. Reuther distinguished senior award. Under my leadership the retirees received a 1.5 billion dollar pension increase that was the largest in history. I also held numerous other positions.

MW: Whitey, what inspired you to become a union leader? Could you explain to our readers what your GM plant produced, give us a little history about the plant and tell our readers what has become of the plant?

WH: I had family working for GM while growing up. I heard stories about the UAW from my brothers, sisters, and especially my uncle who was an old sit downer at the old Fisher 1 plant. In 1956 I hired into the Coldwater Rd. Plant. By the late 50's I got involved in UAW Local 326. As a young man, I had the privilege of meeting Walter Reuther. I had a discussion with him, and I think this was a big factor in my wanting to get more deeply involved in the union.

The Coldwater Rd. Plant was opened in 1953 after being struck by the Beecher tornado. It was the largest die casting and plating facility in the world, as well as, producing hundreds of other metal hardware parts.

After the Memorial Sloan and Kettering Cancer Institute confirmed that UAW Local 326 plant workers were dying of cancer at more than twice the national average, GM began removing all of this work from the plant in the early 1980s. After that, it was a slow downhill spiral death for the plant until it closed in 1999. The former plant is now a parking lot.

MW: You had an illustrious and important career that benefited many people through your various accomplishments. You were a champion for retirees.Could you elaborate a bit and explain some of the highlights of your work on both the Flint and also national level?

WH: When I was a shop committeeman in 1967, I helped negotiate the very first voluntary layoff in the entire UAW. This helped keep over 1000 low seniority employees working while allowing higher seniority employees to be laid off for an 8-week period.

In 1982, as shop chairman I negotiated the first 28 and out layoff. This allowed hundreds of members with 28 years of service to retire, thus preserving the jobs of the 76 and 77 seniority employees.

I was one of the original 99 people who started the Saturn Corp.

At the local level, I am proud of the many local agreements I was able to negotiate for UAW Local 326 members including working conditions, ventilation, lowering unattainable production standards, and safety issues.

Nationally, I helped negotiate job security, a decent living wage and benefits for active workers and a fair and equitable pension and health care for our retirees.

Being the leader of the "COLA on Pensions" movement for retirees in 1990 is probably the highlight of my career. Even though we didn't acquire true COLA, we were able to help all retirees by bringing the oldest seniority up to a higher level of pay and gave the other retirees a decent raise on their pensions. It was the largest increase in history with1.5 billion dollars going directly to needy retirees through the efforts of the "COLA on Pension" committee.

MW: Whitey, in America the rich are flourishing while our manufacturing middle class is evaporating. Our workers have given their entire lives to advance these American based multi-national auto companies. It seems like the corporations, our government and even the workers' own unions are failing them. Negotiations are now under way to secure a new auto pact expiring in September with Detroit's automakers. These auto companies have been on an intensified roll to shutter American plants, cut protective work rules, slice wages, go to unfair two-tiered wage configurations, speed up assembly lines and move production to low wage countries. As a powerful historic union leader, you have left a vast legacy of working throughout your career to garner all of the benefits that are now disappearing. What is happening here? What does this mean for workers, retirees and their families? What does this mean for our next generation? What does this mean for America? What obstacles do you see facing the union going forward with these companies?

WH: I believe with all my heart that Walter Reuther would turn in his grave, if he could see what past and current leaders have done to his beloved union. It would be fair to say that if Walter were still leading this once great union, it would not be in the shape it is today. The noose is seriously tightening on UAW

workers in this country.

The 2-tier wage system you mentioned is a disgrace to our union. This 2-tier system will eventually be reduced to 1-tier of low wage workers after the seniority workers have been bought out or retire with the resulting profits going to the GM Corp.

Working conditions will be unbearable for the new generation of workers with unattainable production standards, gestapo tactics by management, no health and safety standards and weaker union representation. This will all lead to a lower standard of living for workers and their families. As time goes on, the company will get bolder and bolder while the union gets weaker and weaker.

MW: Whitey, it seems as though workers are being blackmailed to give back 70 years of bargained gains while company executives laugh all of the way to the bank with their million dollar bonuses. What are your thoughts relative to the direction that current UAW officials are taking in regards to concessions and redefining the UAW?

WH: It appears that we are on a fast track back to the 1930s. Mike, you are absolutely right. The company execs are laughing all the way to the bank with their million dollar bonuses.

I believe the company is hoodwinking the union. Our leaders are taking the company's word on anything they tell them. We need to know the truth about the company's constant plea of poverty. Solidarity House has always employed some of the finest attorneys and accountants, and it is time we put them to good use.

My thoughts on concessions are that concessions lead to elimination of jobs and the unions' ability to function. Can anyone show me one new UAW job that has been created by concessions?

As to the redefining of the union, I think that if our union leadership does not wise up and quit buying into all of the company lies, it will only be a matter of time before the company wants to do away with union representation entirely.

MW: I believe that top UAW officials are hiding in the warm comfortable protected front engine with conductor Gettelfinger on this American manufacturing concession train heading for worker disaster, that corporate executives are in the safety of their opulent and gilded luxury passenger cars in the middle of this train clicking down the raggedy tracks and that the dreadful, dangerous, sparse, cold and smelly concession caboose at the end has been reserved exclusively for America's autoworkers. Do you agree with that assessment?

WH: Yes I do, Mike. I whole-heartedly agree with your assessment.

MW: Have union officials insulated and gifted themselves with tremendous perks, lavish salaries, super safe pension packages and other special benefits at their gold plated fiefdom at Solidarity House? When they concession away worker and retiree benefits, does it affect their lifestyle personally or is the pain only for the workers and retirees they are supposed to be representing. Could you elaborate?

WH: Mike, this has always been a sore spot with me and should be with every UAW member active or retired.

Mike, most people don't know that our UAW International Reps. live in a world apart from us. A world where they are insulated from ever worrying about money or losing benefits. They have a far superior contract covering themselves than the workers they represent.

They are covered under the standard UAW contract as we all are, plus they have a second retirement plan, over and above the first one, that is funded by our dues. Their health care plan is superior to the workers they represent. Some of the other perks are they get COLA on their second pensions. They qualify for their second pension after as little as five years on staff. There is never a concession contract for these International Reps. It only gets improved upon. Provisions like car allowance improvements, towing, oil changes, expense accounts, raises on pensions, and benefits each contract are taken for granted by International Reps.

I think the pain and suffering is being experienced only by our active workers and retirees; definitely not by our International Reps. Our International Union Reps definitely need to quit asking our members to give concessions while they continue to add to their nest egg.

MW: Whitey, back in 1990 you headed up and led a national program to negotiate cost of living increases on worker pensions. I helped you, did much of the writing and we did TV interviews together.

For this program, you led a massive Detroit rally where union officials came from around the country. In this huge rally, you led the march while Dave Lustig, the vice-chairman of my group, drove and I used the intercom on a Brinks type truck, which went back and forth rallying the thousands of workers who circled the block in Detroit.

Ultimately, the International UAW refused to negotiate C.O.L.A. on pensions but did negotiate a program of step improvements, which I wrote the language for and you pushed. While it was necessary, it wasn't enough for future struggling retirees whose pensions had fallen far behind.

UAW officials said they would always take care of their retirees going forward so there was no need for COLA on worker pensions. They lied and have refused to keep the buying power of older retirees pensions in line with inflation. Could you go into a little more detail as to why you were pushing for C.O.L.A. on pensions?

WH: Mike, that is a simple question for me. Inflation keeps eating away the buying power of retirees, pension checks. Retirees need COLA so they can make ends meet. I can't believe our union would turn their backs on these people while continuing to take care of themselves.

The reward of many years of work should be the fulfillment of all the plans one makes for retirement. Retirement should not be an elusive dream. It should provide one with more than just having time on your hands, wondering what to eat at the next meal, wondering if you can continue to maintain your home, pay property taxes and sustain your present lifestyle. I watch the tape of good union men like you and Dave Lustig driving that Brinks truck around the GM building, and it reminds me of the decent and devoted men we had in those days.

Mike, you are right. The International Union did lie to all of us by stating they were going to keep the buying power of retirees pensions in line with inflation.

MW: Since we worked together in Flint back in the 1980's, auto jobs have been evaporating at lightening speed. Whose fault was it? Was it the autoworkers that brought about the recent decline of the auto industry or was it corporate mismanagement?

WH: Mike, it is not the fault of the workers that the jobs have evaporated. As I look back on it, Mike, GM put our work in scab shops across the country. Our union was well aware of this but failed to take any action against these violations. The evaporation of our jobs was a well-planned scheme by corp. management and continues today as they outsource our jobs overseas.

MW: These factories are not healthy places to work. Your plant had a very high incidence of cancer. In many manufacturing plants, the workers' life expectancy is much less then the normal life expectancy because of the exposure to smoke, fumes, carcinogens and all the other multiple workplace chemicals and hazards. Some plants have tremendous long-term health problems including cancer that come from worker exposure to these hazardous elements. These diseases often don't surface for many years until workers retire. Past UAW leaders negotiated hard won retirements and health care benefits to protect workers. Do you have any comments on this?

WH: My plant was a prime example of cancer deaths due to exposure to carcinogens. Instead of giving concession on our health care, they should be negotiating extra benefits to workers who have been exposed to health hazards. They refused to do this for my plant in 1982, although it was proven my members were dying of cancer at more than twice the national rate.

MW: All active workers will retire one day. Retirees are now being labeled as "legacy costs", like a piece of garbage. A term used in a demeanor by those with an agenda to discredit and dehumanize them so they can be targeted and eliminated as a cost. Legally, UAW negotiated health care benefits belonged to UAW retirees.

On October 18, 2005 UAW President Ron Gettelfinger decided to resort to questionable legal means to concession away the promised retirement health care benefits that were promised to UAW struggling retirees. UAW officials requested that a federal judge approve the right for them to bargain and reduce the health care benefits for their retired members and their spouses, which they promptly did.

You have spent a lifetime in championing retiree's issues. What are your thoughts on Gettelfinger taking his retirees to court to reduce their health care benefits?

WH: Being labeled, " legacy cost" infuriates me. They forget that our retirees worked a lifetime to earn their negotiated pension. As far as Gettelfinger resorting to legal means to concession away our health care, this is wrong, wrong, wrong. For the life of me, I can't figure out what would make the president of the UAW take such a position. To sum it up, Mike, it's a disgrace.

MW: This attack on pensions has shocking repercussions for today's active workers who will be future retirees. Hard won pensions and pension benefits took workers and past union leaderships decades of bargaining and multiple painful strikes to achieve and are tentatively some of the largest givebacks in the history of organized labor. How can any retiree, present or future, hope to afford to live if your union breaks its promises and refuses to negotiate pension increases, just to keep up with rising inflation, and then goes to court once you retire in an effort to concession away what little you have?

WH: Mike, I agree with your assessment of the attack on our pensions. This is why our workers should be able to elect union leaders. This would make them much more accountable to their members.

MW: American workers are God fearing family people who care about our culture. I also believe that labor officials are not being held accountable for how they use their extensive political clout to exert moral and cultural changes in society.

The quandary is that these labor officials want to be considered politically correct so they label moral issues as labor issues and then force their anti-family and anti-Biblical concepts onto the backs of their Judeo-Christian workforce.

Ron Gettelfinger no sooner became President of the UAW when he began a crusade pushing for abortion coverage in benefit packages. Christian Conservative union members shot that one down fast. Clearly, union officials are not only on the wrong side of the bargaining table but also on the wrong side of the Bible.

Gettelfinger's predecessor, Steve Yokich quietly included the partners of homosexual workers into the workers benefits package. Now these same-sex homosexual partners of active workers, who have nothing to do with the auto industry, are receiving full health care benefits that now surpass the retirees who built the UAW. Someone needs to explain to these union officials, in terms they will understand, that regardless of their personal feelings, abortion is cold blooded murder and men marrying men and women marrying women has nothing to do with labor. It is a moral issue.

This is a bonanza for these people but a pitiful and profound betrayal to the retirees who built the union and earned these benefits through decades of sacrifice.

WH: Mike I think your points are well taken.

MW: I would be remiss if I didn't ask a question about Michael Moore. When we were active and fighting the fight, Michael Moore hit the colossal financial jackpot when he alluded to the world that he was a key figure fighting the battle that the real union activists were engaged in. Moore began and based his career on the illusion that he was the Flint Don Quixote activist who represented Flint and autoworkers in taking on GM. You and I were union activist leaders before and during that time, and we know how ridiculous that is. This is fundamentally important because it is what he has based his entire career upon. What did Moore base his credentials on? What do you have to say about Moore?

WH: Mike, as an active union member and representative for many years, I think Michael Moore is totally unqualified to speak for autoworkers or the union.

He has become rich off the misery of thousands of good, hard working people.

I never knew Mr. Moore to have any involvement with the union or the workers. In fact, I never knew him, or saw him, period.

MW: In conclusion, you were in the public eye addressing American workers most pressing issues. It took an amazing amount of inner strength, moral conviction and backbone to do this.

Thank you so much for your lifetime of dedication to American workers and for participating in this interview. My respect for you runs deep. Your answers will speak volumes and give a revealing glimpse of the inner workings of union and activist leaders.

WH:

Thank you, Mike, for your insightful questions. I enjoyed the interview.

...***See companion article at*** - *UAW RETIREE BETRAYAL*

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