



Cornell University
ILR School

Cornell University ILR School
DigitalCommons@ILR

Michael Westfall Writings

Kheel Center for Labor-Management
Documentation & Archives

6-2009

The Real Story about Flint

Michael Westfall

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/westfall>

Thank you for downloading an article from DigitalCommons@ILR.

Support this valuable resource today!

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation & Archives at DigitalCommons@ILR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michael Westfall Writings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@ILR. For more information, please contact hlmdigital@cornell.edu.

The Real Story about Flint

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/id131.html>, accessed 12/14/2011]

THE REAL STORY ABOUT FLINT

By: Mike Westfall
6-2009

It is distressing that the important Flint story would be reduced to a carnival sideshow where the most important issue debated between politician Dan Kildee and entertainer Rush Limbaugh is how much of Flint should be bulldozed. This has diverted media attention away from the valid issues. How can anyone see the vacant buildings and not think of the devastation done to the workers and families who lived in those homes? No, the Flint story isn't about planting trees and grass on land where the bulldozed homes of displaced workers and their families once lived. The legitimate story is what caused so much of Flint to become vacant to the point where such a debate would ever occur.

Flint has obviously been a one-industry auto town. It was where both General Motors and the UAW began. GM was America's largest manufacturer, and Flint had the largest concentration of GM workers in the world. In America the domestic auto industry wasn't just any industry; it was our premier industry. It almost single handedly created our middle class.

The Flint narrative was eloquently summed up by UAW pioneer and founding father, labor icon Victor Reuther in 1987, when my group sponsored the 50th Anniversary of the UAW Rally at Flint's Carman Ainsworth School. I brought in Victor as the keynote speaker. He said, "This great nation that once held in its hand the freedom and destiny of the people of the world, because it was the arsenal of democracy, is now having its industrial strength exported bit by bit. There is no thought of the impact on the nation or the communities, because the corporation's loyalty never extended beyond their own checkbook. They see the auto centers turned into ghost towns. They see the for-sale signs on the homes where the workers have tried to pay off their mortgage and have no twinge of conscience. In the end, you and the people of this nation will be asked to pay the bill."

In 1987 top UAW officials didn't want to hear our message and boycotted this historic Flint rally. They refused to attend and turned their backs on one of the UAW's key founding fathers. This gave us a signal in 1987 that top UAW officials were beginning to change their direction and definition of representation.

Why is so much of Flint now vacant? Flint was a blue-collar worker town. For over thirty years General Motors and their governmental pals have been betraying and sacrificing middle-class workers on the alter of corporate restructuring. Just look at what they did with the advent of NAFTA. The living wage jobs they have permanently sacrificed, as they weakened Flint and other manufacturing communities, were the jobs that our children and nation needed today. Consider the tax breaks our workers in their communities gave to these companies.

Why weren't the insulated union officials, who have gifted themselves personally with lavish salaries, secure generous pension packages and vast perks at their gold plated fiefdom at Solidarity House, minding the store and developing strategies decades ago to counter these issues? Why were they saying yes to one-sided concessions, when they should have been saying no? Did they not know the UAW was losing hundreds of thousands of members?

The betrayed auto retirees built this nation. Their negotiated health care benefits were earned and paid for by these retirees over their difficult working years in lieu of wages.

Why did UAW officials divorce themselves from their retirees and waste precious financial resources on dead end programs, like the jobs banks, when they could have and should have used those and other financial resources to vest struggling retiree health benefits? They knew there was a problem long ago. Retirees were denied the right to vote against the pilfering of their healthcare benefits through the UAW officials VEBA program, which allowed the corporation to divest of their retiree health care obligations.

Auto companies have always had pipe dreams of gullible union officials who would negotiate an inadequate cap on retiree healthcare benefits, so they could legally walk away from their retiree healthcare responsibilities, but never before would UAW officials betray their retirees. Shortly, insufficiently negotiated VEBA funds will dry up, and the top union officials who negotiated this program will be unaccountable, because they are retired and enjoying their separate super-safe pensions paid for by the workers' union dues. When this cyclical downturn gets better, and GM begins making huge profits again, as it will, it will be very clear that Flint, the workers and the betrayed retirees are the ones who paid the ultimate unfair costs, because of the reprehensible choices of these UAW officials.

These issues are obviously not limited to Flint. They are also relevant to Saginaw, Detroit, Lansing and every other auto related community around our country. What we are talking about here is a powerful destructive attack on our middle class by forces that should be helping not harming our workers and communities. Neither Dan Kildee nor Rush Limbaugh will ever feel the direct personal gut wrenching pain that the families of the displaced auto workers, forgotten retirees, merchants and communities have been subjected to by the unholy corporate restructuring 'trifecta' of corporate, top union official and governmental bungling. It has been a horse race between these three to see who could be the most incompetent. The only losers have been the workers and their communities like Flint.

Workers and their communities could expect companies to be motivated only by the rules of the market place jungle. They could also expect insensitive and distant governmental politicians who don't relate to their problems to not have their best interests at heart. What workers and retirees hadn't bargained for was a total disconnect and breakdown by the only power they really had to protect them, and that was by the top UAW officials.

UAW officials lacked purpose, vision and direction as they freely sacrificed autoworkers sacred pensions, jobs, healthcare, benefits and work standards. They redefined the term union as they developed ongoing local "modern operating agreements" that evaporated long-standing hard won work rules and job protections. They allowed companies to replace existing workers with new workers, at half the wages, inflicted speed-ups and began treating their struggling retirees, who built the UAW, as disposable legacy costs. As they became corporate cheerleaders, they caved in on continual one-sided worker sacrifices, even after there was nothing left to give, which reduced autoworkers to threatened and frightened collective beggars. None of this had to happen, and it didn't stop the shuttering of the factories, just look at Flint. These unaccountable UAW officials made the easy choices, because they couldn't stop saying yes, when they should have been saying no. They destined the autoworkers, they should have been representing, to a suicidal contractual agreement that condemns workers and their families to a lifetime of being America's working poor. These union officials acclimated as their primary function the duty of collecting union dues to feather their own salaries and personal pensions and have totally redefined their purpose as leaders of a "new company union". The Flint sit-downers, and the Reuther brothers must be rolling over in their graves.

70 years ago great visionary Flint union leaders with backbone like the Reuthers and the sit-downers faced difficult times and terrible challenges. They did not cave in like the group now populating Solidarity House. They were loyal, understood solidarity, defended the workers, and built America's middle class, creating a better America that energized our nation with jobs, decent wages and better working conditions. Today's capitulating UAW officials have turned the clock backwards 70 years, before the time of a union in the auto industry, as they have quickly evaporated all the gains. Their wretched record will be recorded in labor history and it will be their shameful testimony and legacy.

Relative to Flint, there has been incompetence on every level. The jobs evaporated, so the workers had to leave. The standard of living for those few workers that remain will be vastly reduced from the many who once worked there. This will benefit no one. This is why Flint has

become a ghost town, and why people talk about bulldozing it. That is the real story in Flint.

