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U.A.W. 50th Anniversary Anti-Concession Rally 1987- Victor Reuther Part B

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/id16.html>, accessed 12/14/2011]

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U.A.W. 50th Anniversary / Anti-Concession Rally 1987 / Victor Reuther Part B

50th Anniversary of the UAW / Anti Concession Flint Rally

Victor Reuther UAW Founding Leader

Dave Barber Popular TV / Radio Personality

Don Douglas President UAW Local 594

Mike Westfall Rally Chairman

Mike Westfall

Don Douglas is a powerful union leader who has received national attention as a leader willing to take on GM on the issue of whipsawing.

Don Douglas is President of U.A.W. local 594. Brother Douglas has fought concessions in both the 1982 and 1984 contracts .

U.A.W. Local 594 has experienced perhaps the most extreme application of GM whip sawing tactics of anywhere in the country. Brother Douglas has refused to be blackmailed and just last Monday ended local 594's strike victoriously Applause.... by trouncing GM and returning many laid off workers.

Let's all give a warm welcome to Don Douglas

Don Douglas....

Thank you Mike. We have some very distinguished speakers here today and I do not want to take up any of their precious time so I will keep it short.

The grass roots movement of this union has to be revived. If we are going to be successful in Chicago next week and on to the table in September the leadership of our union and, I repeat what Mike said, this is a pro union rally and if we are going to be successful in September then the leadership has to hear from the grass roots

There has been a lot written and said about what we did in Pontiac recently but just let me tell you that some of the fight we had with GM started over the treatment of the U.A.W. workers transferred down to Pontiac from U.A.W. local 598.

15 months ago GM began to tell us they were not going to recognize the rights of the Flint people. They weren't going to give them job classifications, they began to tell us they were not going to give them promotion rights and then they were going to take our relief time and there were several other issues along the way. We told them mainly that we were not going to tolerate that. The main ingredient to our success was the fact that

we were open and above board with our membership and we kept them constantly updated with what the issues were .When our timing was right we went to our membership and said we need your support and they blessed us with a 97.6 % strike authorization .

Mike talked about 82 and 84 when we fought concessions and I see my co chairman down there Pete Kelly who worked along side of us.

We have the issues there is no question about it .We have been the victims of whipsawing in Pontiac and everybody is going to be a victim . If you haven't had your turn then your turns coming unless we stop it.

I have an important comment before I close. I think Mike Westfall who has kicked this thing off and in light of what he has had to deal with Mike Westfall has pulled off a magnificent success here by getting this Rally together because he was told Applauseextended ovation.... Mike was told by top union officials that he shouldn't have this rally and they were going to discourage it and not allow union leadership attendance from leaders in Flint and they told Flint leaders they shouldn't go because there might be someone there that might upset somebody.... I hope they weren't talking about me prolonged applause....

If they were or they were talking about myself or somebody else I think that is very sad because this rally was designed to stop one of the most incredible cancers that I have ever witnessed in this union and that is GM's ability to pit on against another.And with that I will turn it back to Mike Westfall.... Applause.

Mike Westfall....

Brother Reuther has graciously accepted our invitation today to be a part of this rally.Victor Reuther is the sole survivor of the brothers Reuther.

Only one year after Walter Reuther, the late great president of the U.A.W., was shot by "a would be assassin" Victor himself became the target of an assassin and was shot .

Victor played major roles in the sit down strike in the 1930's .He served as the director of the U.A.W. education department, the C.I.O. European representative, the director of international affairs , and administrative assistant to Walter Reuther until his retirement.

Brother Victor Reuther has spent a lifetime as an industrial unionist, social activist, and humanitarian.

I think it is almost poetic that 50 years after the great sit down Victor has come out of retirement and back to Flint where it all began.

Victor Reuther....

I want to thank you for working with Mike in organizing this event. When I return to Flint I am coming homeApplause.... and it is fitting that at this moment of history in our great union and in the history of this beloved country of ours that you should gather again here in Flint and provide a clear sense of direction and commitment to the greatest force that you have within your command that's your union.... applause....

There are some and unfortunately some in the U.A.W. leadership that suggest that Walter Reuther might be turning over in his grave at the thought of what his younger brother was saying these days.

...Well, let me set the record straight.... Applause.... If there is anything that would cause Walter Reuther to turn over in his grave it's the thought that General Motor's is getting

away with what they are doing today.... Applause....Ovation....

I want to say so that it unmistakably clear that I don't have to consult a deceased brother to know that what GM is doing is a betrayal to its commitment to its workers, a betrayal to the communities that has helped it prosper, and a betrayal of this nationApplause....Ovation....

That should be made clear not only in union halls but in city councils and state legislatures and in the government of the United States Applause....

This great nation that once held in its hand the freedom and the destiny of the people of the world because it was the arsenal of democracy is now having its industrial strength exported bit by bit ...why ? To enhance the profits of private corporations.

There is no thought of the impact on the nation or the communities because their loyalty never extended beyond their own pocketbook.

They see great steel centers and auto centers turned into ghost towns .They can see the for sale signs on the homes where the workers and their families have tried for years to pay off the mortgage .They can see those signs and have no twinge of conscience but we are members of a force that is committed to not only those who do the daily work in this nation whether they are steel workers or auto workers or rubber workers or school teachers we have always been committed to justice to those people and by bringing justice to those who build this nation we bring justice to the nation itself.... Applause....

In the founding days of this union those who sat across the table whether it was in steel or auto were in most incidences entrepreneurs. They knew something about the business they had been chosen to head.

They cared about the quality of the steel they made and the quality of the autos that were produced .Tragically a group has come to power at the great industries of ours who are not entrepreneurs who are not manufacturers and who know little or nothing about what goes on at the workshop level they are ...money manipulators Applause....

Let the whole nation be reminded by you, for their destiny is involved as well, that the money manipulators of wall street who can promote mergers and make millions by those manipulations in the end that you and the people of this nation will be asked to pay the bill.

I could not live with myself and be silent as to what is going on in this nation today nor can any of you .If you spoke out once before you who are old-timers ..It is time to speak out again.... Applause....

It is time you remind yourselves , it is time you remind the leaders of this great union of ours and time to remind the nation that when it comes to questions of loyalty and justice to working people and the needs of this nation there is no generation gap.... Applause....

The young people that hear the message today will respond with the same courage that others did in 1937.

There is a very simple lesson of economics that the brokers of Wall Street and the heads of GM and the steel companies have not learned yet. They may have to learn it the hard way. The lesson is one that Walter tried to teach a good many years ago. I remember when the Ford Motor Company first built what was considered a revolutionary automated engine plant in Cleveland which reduced to minutes what once took hours to machine an engine block. The plant manager who was understandably proud of the technology couldn't resist the opportunity to give Walter a dig in the ribs so as he embraced this assembly line that stretched a half a mile in length without a worker in sight except for

an occasional machine repairman who appeared from almost nowhere when a flashing red light indicated a machine cutting tool needed replacing. The plant manager said with the sweep of his arm "well Reuther how are you going to collect union dues from all these machines"?

Walter looked at him with a dead pan expression on his face and said 'well that is not what worries me. How you going to sell your Ford cars to those machines".... Applause.... Ovation....

You have a message that must be heard loud and clear by General Motors at the bargaining table and it must be heard clear by every owner of the little grocery store and butcher shop whose well being depends on your working and drawing decent wages. It is a message that those concerned with only making a quick buck by exporting jobs whether it is to Mexico or Korea or Brazil or to any other damn place... let them sell those cars over in Korea Applause Ovation....

You are the ones to tell them that. You not only have the right you have the moral obligation to be honest with yourself and with them.

Do you realize that for the first time in the history of this great nation a generation has now been born that cannot look forward to a standard of living as high as their parents enjoyed .

Are you going to pull your tail between your legs and whimper in the corner?

Or are you going to stand on your feet and say, "This nation has a future", and the workers of this nation have a future and we are going to defend our jobs and we are going to defend our nation?Applause....Ovation....

50 years ago when we fought the battle of the sit down in this city we had a president of the union , Homer Martin, who was willing to negotiate with the president of GM for a separate strike settlement in each of the plants on strike across the country.

But John Lewis who was the head of the C.I.O. said "When you bargain with a national corporation that makes its decisions nationally you negotiate nationally and you negotiate a national agreement."

We have been experiencing these last few years the spectacle of our own union which has a national agreement with GM permitting that corp. to single out local by local and say to them if you do not write a local agreement that will give us these concessions whether it is in wiping out job classifications that reflect 50 years of collective bargaining experience, whether it is wage concessions, whether it is substituting the so called team relationship or the Japanese system for a true grievance system they have been permitted to pit one local union off against another. That kind of pressure and that kind of threat that can only lead to the destruction of a national agreement.

When GM decides that it is going to close 9 plants that will throw out 30000 workers on the streets and many more whose jobs depend directly on those they make that decision at central headquarters .Make no mistake about it they don't leave that decision to local plant management and it is time your union says to GM you will not undertake negotiations with locally elected leadership under the threat or pressure of either you give x number of concessions or we will bypass your plant Applause

I assumed that message was clear after 50 years of experience but apparently our own elected leadership needs to be reminded of thatApplause....Ovation....

GM is not only whipsawing one local against another, one city against another, one worker against another but they are also whipsawing on the tax front as well.

They have blacked mailed community after community and most of all in this state where they have taken their biggest take for many years .

They have gone to community after community and said you have got to reduce our taxes.

Never in the history of GM did they ever pay their fair share of taxes.

They want to bankrupt our school system, they want to impoverish the county and city governments throughout this state and throughout this nation ... should we silent about that?

There has been a lot of talk about the need for new trade legislation. We are the only nation in the world that is being played as a bunch of suckers. Any corporation around the whole damned world can go to any third world country where wages are 65 cents or less an hour and where a military dictatorship such as in Korea will throw you in prison if you dare start a union but you can wrap the finished product up in cellophane and come here and sell it in this suckers market....Applause....

In France they will not tolerate the import of vehicles in excess of 4% of the total manufactured in France.

In all of the common market countries in Western Europe wherever automobiles are built and way down in Australia as well they have legislation that protects their home market from this kind of corporate gouging.

It is about time that the people of our nation were protected by this kind of legislation.

Even if they offer two McDonald jobs for every lost good union job the nation has lost.

We have to go back to basics in collective bargaining again. They have been undermining the positions of trade unions declaring bankruptcy when they are not really bankrupt ,using it as an excuse to get out from a collective bargaining agreement and getting away with it.

This union is great and it is strong and it is powerful only if the members exercise their rights.

Walter Reuther knew how to turn to the workers in our union and gain the power and the strength that is needed to make GM say yes when they were determined to say no.

I am glad Mike Westfall raised the issue we have not come here to create division in the ranks of the union. We know we can only win justice when we stand solidly together .

I was at the last U.A.W. convention in Anaheim. The only way I could get in was to go as a newspaper reporter. I went as a reporter and I witnessed things that were of deep concern to me.

When I was a boy and my father was a trade union leader and the teamsters union had a good name .They were the union that invited Franklyn Delano Roosevelt to open his campaign for the presidency on the platform of the teamsters union.

That union has fallen into disrepute.

We have big problems here .No generation of Americans wants to pass on to its children and those that take leadership positions following them an organization that's in shambles

That's lost its way or an organization that is no longer equal to the challenge.

To you who are a part of this generation the membership and the leadership in our great union have an incredible obligation and an even more important opportunity.

For you can bring new spirit not only to this union but the nation as a whole which has become cynical by politicians who don't remember important things.

The challenges today that confront us are enormous yet they are small indeed compared to what the sit down strikers were confronted with Applause....

They dwarfed the problems and challenges we are faced with now.

We have a leadership at the local level far better schooled and trained than my generation.

You are members of a great union .Carry out your obligations to that union. Keep it strong, keep it united, keep the rank and file involved in it spread your word out into the community.

God bless all of you.... Applause....extended Ovation....

Mike Westfall....

At this time I would like to introduce my friend popular TV/ radio personality Dave Barber. Dave is concerned with Flint and Dave is concerned with workers and Dave is concerned with you.

So lets all give a very warm welcome to Dave.

Dave Barber....

You have to be able to take the heat if you are going to take stands on issues. Because if you take stands on issues 50% of the people at any given time are going to be angry.

The thing I respect about Mike Westfall and his organization is that they are not afraid.

Mike Westfall and I don't always have to agree like you and I may not always agree but I think the one fundamental premise that we have to accept is the day we stop talking to one another the day we discontinue our dialogue with one another is a very sad day in our community. and I think right or wrong or agree or disagree I think we all have to be willing to not be afraid to stand up and speak our minds and I certainly have the shoulders to handle the responsibility of doing so and that is why I accepted Mikes offer to come here today.

It is important that we continue our dialogue and our communication.

Roger Smith will not come on my program..."Mike Westfall will come on my program"Applause ... extended....

I think I enjoy a little different perspective than most people in the so called media in that I was born in the Flint community raised in the Flint community and I live in the city of Flint currently.

We have become a one industry town but more importantly it's been a one corporation town unlike an Akron or Pittsburg which might have different companies representing the same industry. We have General Motors.

I live in the city of Flint and am proud to do so but not one major corporation executive lives in this city.

And it's been a long time since any of them have.

You see I don't see this rally or meeting as a partisan issue it is a bi- partisan issue that should affect every single citizen in our community young or old, republican or democrat, black or white this is a community issue.... Applause

I certainly think it would be naive of me to think that if jobs will continue to be eroded in the market place it will not affect my business in broadcasting. It will affect the advertisers that buy advertising, it will affect their business and there will be a trickle down effect.

My grandfather was a very early UAW member, my father is a retiree, my mother contributed to the war effort at AC spark plug division and for all to long we have had a plantation mentality in our community where we became very deactivated about what was going on in our community .The plantation mentality being that somehow if there is a problem in our community that GM will just take care of it.

We are now coming to the realization that is not the case.

I am not a GM employee but as a citizen of this community I see the tax costs for GM to operate per sq ft are less then what you and I pay for our homes in Genesee county and that's a travesty.

I don't think you have to be a Harvard business graduate to understand that's just not fair.

One of the most troubling things that ever happened to me when I started doing a talk show back in the 1970's on white shirt day. I read the original union agreement which was I think 9 paragraphs. It was real brief and I asked the listeners to call in with their thoughts with what the UAW meant to them. Well the phones kind of trickled in and my lines were never all filled up .The next hour I had a veterinarian on my program to answer questions about your pets and the lines were jammed .I mean they asked questions about their toy poodle and their Persian cat and I got thinking there is something that just doesn't make sense here .

There has obviously been a tremendously large turn out here today and I think that speaks well of all you people.

Every single person should be here.

As I was talking before the program Roger Smith is now giving foreign workers Frijoles and rice while he eats at the London chop house. They build the product for literally pennies per hour. I think there is just something called fundamental human dignity irrespective of where you live, the car you drive or the home you live in there is just something called human dignity.

I think one of the things that Mike Westfall has done by doing publications and newsletters is that it says hey wait a minute I am going to challenge , I want another perspective and I am not going to accept what you tell me.

Flint's future is definitely in question. I became embittered a couple of contracts ago when workers gave concessions when we were in those troubled times and before the ink was dried those salaried employees were getting bonuses.... Applause....

To me that wrecks that the board of directors of that corporation were just lying to take advantage.

I like Mike Westfall because he shoots from the hip. There is an old saying that states

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference .

Thank you . You have the ability to make the changeApplause....Ovation

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LITERATURE PENNED BY THOSE WHO FELT THE EMOTIONS AND HAD THE ABILITY TO ARTICULATE THE RESULTS OF THEIR COLLECTIVE WORK TO TEXT."

MIKE WESTFALL

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