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Abstract
[Excerpt] Steel and auto. These are the basics of American basic industry, and the United Steelworkers and United Autoworkers, representing workers in these industries, have been at the very core of the American labor movement. For most of the years since World War II, the membership of these two unions has constituted something like one -seventh of the organized workforce, and the USW and UAW pioneered many of the innovations in collective bargaining that all unions now take for granted.

Keywords
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Rusted Dreams:
Hard Times in a Steel Community

by David Bensman & Roberta Lynch

Taking On General Motors:
A Case Study of the UAW Campaign to Keep GM Van Nuys Open

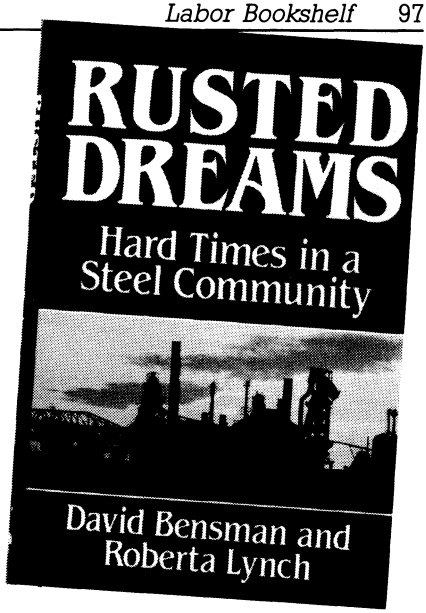
by Eric Mann

Steel and auto. These are the basics of American basic industry, and the United Steelworkers and United Autoworkers, representing workers in these industries, have been at the very core of the American labor movement. For most of the years since World War II, the membership of these two unions has constituted something like one-seventh of the organized workforce, and the USW and UAW pioneered many of the innovations in collective bargaining that all unions now take for granted.

Auto and steel. To a large part of the American public these are now symbols of a past era that is dying in our midst, and the UAW and USW are dinosaurs incapable of adjusting to the new reality. While sympathy is often extended to those who are enduring a painful transition, we are counselled to let go of the past and look forward to a post-industrial, high tech/high touch and (non-union) world.

Steel and auto. That's what these two books by *Labor Research Review* authors are about, and they are far and away the best books on what's happening in these basic industries in the 1980s. Part of the reason they're the best is that they don't let go, that they understand and chronicle the fight to save the basics—industry and unionism.

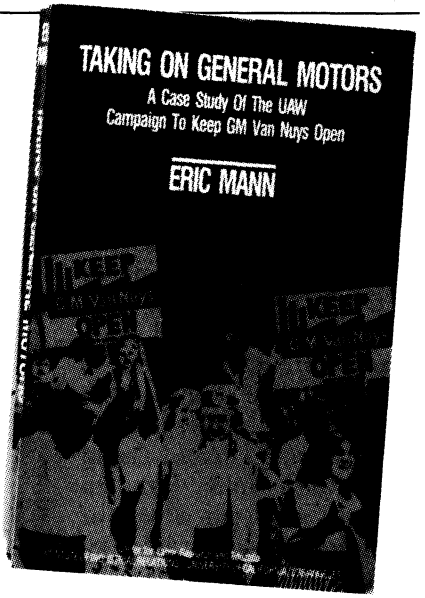
Both books focus intensely on a limited local reality—one steel town in *Rusted Dreams*, one GM plant and its local union in *Taking on General Motors*—but each unfolds around it a comprehensive analysis of the industry, the company and the union, and



shows how they fit in our national economic and political circumstances. One of the extraordinary things about each of these books is how, in somewhat different ways, each moves effortlessly from the local to the national and even global, from the present to the past, and then back to the local present again.

In *Rusted Dreams* David Bensman and Roberta Lynch tell the story of South Chicago, a steel community located within the Chicago city limits, and of the shutdown of two huge steel mills there in the early 1980s. The causes of each of the shutdowns is carefully explained—the abrupt and total shutdown of Wisconsin Steel, once owned and always controlled by International Harvester, and the more gradual dwindling of U.S. Steel's South Works from more than 8,000 jobs in the 1970s to less than 1,000 now. While explaining the role of global overcapacity in the industry and of national economic policies which undermined the steel industry as a whole, Bensman and Lynch also show the incredible ineptitude of management and how, time after time, they attempted to shift the cost of their mistakes onto their workers.

In the end the social costs were high, as Bensman and Lynch detail the deterioration of this once proud, once modestly prosperous blue-collar community. The institutions the community counted on to represent them, the union and the local political machine, proved powerless to help. The local political power structure, in fact, shamelessly exploited people's misery for its own purposes (as masterfully documented in a chapter on Chicago machine politics titled "The Limits of Clout"). Within each of the local unions—an "independent," quasi-company union at Wisconsin Steel, and USW Local 65 at South Works—fightback groups were formed that had some impact in alleviating some of the pain. At South Works, U.S. Steel wrested a series of local concessions from the union, only to keep returning for more under the constant threat of more layoffs and shutdowns; in the end both the local and the International told U.S. Steel (now USX) to go to hell and



tried to mount an independent effort to save the mill. That effort hardly got off the ground, but it laid some groundwork for a much more extensive, though equally unsuccessful, fight to save U.S. Steel's Duquesne Works in the Pittsburgh area.

Rusted Dreams ends with a chapter advocating a national economic policy to save basic industry. This chapter, by itself, is worth the price of the book. It is the most eloquent and comprehensive statement we have of the need to save America's industrial base and of the radically different political-economic approach we'll need to do it.

Eric Mann's *Taking On General Motors* also deals with a plant shutdown—but this one didn't happen and Mann explains why.

Rusted Dreams deals with the shutdowns in steel in the early 1980s, and while the fights to stop them were valiant and inspiring, the fighters were grasping at straws, not knowing what to do or how to do it. In the California auto industry, the situation was similar as one auto plant after another shut down in the early '80s. But the early ham-handed attempts to fight back at GM South Gate and Mack Truck prepared the ground for UAW Local 645's successful campaign to keep the GM assembly plant in Van Nuys open.

UAW 645's story is a complicated one, and Eric Mann tells it in fascinating detail—including deft biographical profiles of the key personalities around the political splits within the local. The internal life of a local union has never been studied as deeply or explained as clearly as this book does. Different races and ethnic groups, different ideological orientations, different strategic and tactical options, different perceptions of GM and of the world at large are presented in a complex mosaic whose final form is far from finished as the book ends in Summer 1987.

Two groups within the local took different approaches to saving the plant—one advocated concessions to GM on traditional work rules, adopting GM's "team concept" approach, while the other formed the Campaign to Keep GM Van Nuys Open and threatened

to mount a Los Angeles-area boycott of GM cars if the company shut down Van Nuys. Mann was himself the local's Campaign coordinator and makes no pretense of being a neutral observor. He argues forcefully for the labor-community coalition boycott approach and against concessions, but he presents the other point-of-view clearly and fairly, even as he argues against it.

When GM announced a series of plant shutdowns in Fall 1986, Van Nuys was not one of them—as all the analysts had predicted it would be. The "team concept" faction within UAW 645 had pushed through concessions and they argued that these had saved the plant. Mann meets this point-of-view head-on and argues persuasively that this makes no sense—that it was only the threat of a boycott, and the powerful community coalition the local had built around that threat, that can possibly explain why GM decided to keep Van Nuys open.

Mann's book has many other valuable and interesting qualities (including a lengthy and colorful history of General Motors), but its most important aspect is this: The Campaign to Keep GM Van Nuys Open has achieved one of the few victories that can be pointed to by the national movement against plant shutdowns that has emerged from unions and industrial communities in the past decade. But GM, through sophisticated public relations techniques as well as the considerable power it can exert on the shopfloor, has stolen the public awareness of this victory. Van Nuys was saved, GM says, because the local union *cooperated* and granted concessions; therefore, if other plants want to stay open, they should not fight GM, but "join the team."

Mann takes that argument apart piece by piece, and though this book may tell you more than you want to know about UAW 645's struggles, it is all necessary to understand how they beat GM through sustained energetic organizing around a boycott threat and not through a passive acceptance that "GM knows best."

Books like *Rusted Dreams* and *Taking On General Motors* are few and far between, and they need to be read and debated by labor and community activists. Fortunately, despite their serious content, reading them won't be a chore. *Rusted Dreams* is a tightly written drama that reads like a novel, even as it makes its complex analyses and arguments. *Taking On GM* is a delightfully rambling organizer's report, full of the kind of perceptive observations and detailed strategizing that organizers thrive on. Both, in their different ways, are well-written in a popular, accessible style that draws you into their stories.

—Jack Metzgar