

A View From The Line



There's a place on the Far South Side of Chicago that's gone through some very hard times and some rather good times.

It's pulled through when so many other places have passed into history.

I'm talking about the plant that Henry Ford built.

It wasn't always a place that the United Auto Workers represented, but it has become a bright symbol of organized labor for not only this city but the nation. The first contract was signed in 1946. The base hourly rate agreed on was \$1.40 per hour.

Through the years we have seen many benefits added to the contracts. Thanks to negotiations we have received everything from higher base hourly rates to good insurance coverage. Also, we've earned many benefits for our family members. In the years when Ford wasn't doing as well, the membership had to accept less in the way of benefits, and in some cases, the loss of some benefits completely. But, through it all the hope that negotiations would win back our share of benefits was always there. This is what kept the UAW membership going toward the future.

In our recent past, the UAW had to come to the table with the mindset to survive. Not only did Congress send a message to the American people that the average UAW member didn't need to be paid as we are, but we as a membership should take most if not all of the blame for the state of the whole industry.

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International UAW/Ford Department members and the Ford Motor Co. took a different path than the other two industry members. Ford pushed back from the bailout table and refused to file for bankruptcy. The International UAW refused to ball up and throw away their contract and decided through negotiations to modify its contract.

Here we are almost two years later and through that glimmer of hope (negotiations), we have been seeing the light of our future getting brighter. We have proven that the Chicago labor force is still strong, and we see that Ford Motor Co. still has trust and faith in the UAW membership, Local UAW leaders and the International UAW.

The Ford Chicago Assembly Plant has moved into the focus of national news. We have proven this workforce can build the quality products that are needed to survive. This workforce will swell to well over double its former size. The plant will receive another Ford product (Explorer) which has been received very favorably from none other than President Obama. Ford has invested some \$400 million of its very tight budget into the plant that just two years ago was on the so-called chopping block. We have future products scheduled to be produced by this workforce even after our most recent launches of the Taurus, Lincoln MKS and the all-new Explorer.

UAW and Ford Motor Co. leaders have proven that the first and most important part of this fight to survive is the ability to communicate, reason and negotiate our way back to the top.

Negotiation of modifications instead of reconstructing a whole new contract has been a very trying point of business for not only the corporate level leaders of Ford Motor Co. but also the International UAW leadership. Both will state it was at times a very uphill and bumpy negotiation. Also, the Local UAW leadership has had a rough time trying to keep their own and the memberships' minds open to reason and communication.

Through the Local and International UAW leadership and the open communication given through both, this membership has started to see the benefits of their hard work and negotiations.

We have seen resistance from small groups within our rank-and-file membership against these hard-fought modifications. There have been protests against our International leadership at the Constitutional Convention over the modifications. This local membership has even seen the loss of some of the leaders that supported the modifications. But, through it all our leaders in Detroit and the local leaders here in

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Chicago stood fast with their negotiations to not only secure their membership a future but to help secure a future for the company they work for. Our new International President Bob King had stated and reinforced by the local plant chairman that making our rate of pay would mean nothing if there wasn't a plant to go to in the morning.

Now in this short span of two years there is very different news coming from the South Side. Our membership is looking at its self on network television. We read interviews given by our membership in papers. And we have again that hope that only communication and reason through negotiation can give.

But, we have to realize that we are not alone in this movement toward our future. This is not all about the UAW/Ford membership. Although it may seem that way by looking at the TV or the papers, as we go in and out of the plant it would be easy to think that the steady work and some overtime are just the benefits we have been waiting for. But stop, look around.

Through our negotiated movement we have not only benefited UAW members, we have helped I.B.E.W, Laborers, Iron Workers, Operating Engineers, Sheet Metal Workers and Teamsters to see this glimmer of hope. Yes, all those faces looking over the edge of the roof waiting for the iron, the faces watching so as to move the tin to the right place, the faces coming up from our pits, the hands digging the pipe routes and the strong backs carrying the parts to finish the job, are all in this movement towards "our future."

As President Obama put it: "The best workforce in the world" will put this country back at the top.

We have to thank the leaders of the UAW and Ford for finding the path that has given organized labor in Chicago and the nation that glimmer of hope. Through their negotiation this workforce has proven once again we are the best workforce in the world.

By Dave Schoenecker, a UAW member and Ford employee for more than 30 years, all spent at the Chicago Assembly Plant. He's also a former UAW secretary-treasurer and an International UAW Constitutional Convention Delegate.

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