



United Auto Workers President Owen Bieber: "Where the power of persuasion fails, we will use the persuasion of power without hesitation."

Worried autoworkers shy away from new directions

By David Moberg

ANAHEIM, CALIF.

DEMOCRACY ISN'T AN EASY FORM OF GOVERNMENT, former Congresswoman Barbara Jordan reminded the 2,100 delegates to the United Auto Workers' triennial convention in late June. It was a timely warning. Democracy—in both the workplace and the union—was the hot issue before the UAW representatives.

The union has moved increasingly into joint union-management programs that cover topics ranging from worker education

to improving product quality. Proponents defend them as necessary moves to save jobs and as steps toward economic democracy.

But critics argue that while many of the individual programs are good, an overall union strategy of "jointness" has led union officials to identify more with corporate aims and ignore legitimate worker discontent.

UAW CONVENTION

They contend that consequently the union's own internal democracy has been weakened

and that rank-and-file members are losing their voice.

The critics, mainly linked in a loose New Directions Movement, were overwhelmed at the convention, losing every contested resolution and their two regional director races. But they did provoke what was probably the most vigorous debate since the early '50s. They also prodded the dominant administration caucus to issue caveats about the joint programs while still vigorously defending them.

At times the debate has been framed as a choice between cooperative or adversarial relations between management and labor. But UAW President Owen Bieber told delegates "that if joint programs get off the track or if joint programs are abused, we're going to fix them or we're going to throw them out.... Where the power of persuasion fails, we will use the persuasion of power without hesitation."

For their part, most critics acknowledged that some joint programs can be useful, such as alcohol and drug abuse treatment as alternatives to discharge, or even consultations

The reformists lost, but the debate was the best since the '50s.

on bringing new work to a factory. New Directions has criticized some new assembly line work teams as a form of speed-up, but not all critics would abolish the teams. New Directions delegate Mark Masaoka, from the Van Nuys, Calif., General Motors plant, said workers there were mainly disappointed that the team has not given them promised job security or a meaningful voice.

New Directions leaders call for more com-

prehensive rank-and-file decision-making, better job security and other quids pro quo in exchange for workers' money-saving ideas and systematic efforts to prevent management from pitting workers or local unions against each other in competition for jobs ("whipsawing"). They want the union to have its own clearly defined, worker- and community-oriented agenda for these joint programs. They want extraordinary precautions to prevent appointed union representatives on joint programs—who can number in the hundreds in large locals—from becoming co-opted by management.

Whipsaw worries: The UAW has not provided comprehensive guidelines for locals entering joint programs, but the new Report of the Commission on the Future of the UAW concludes that "the solution to problems and potential abuses [of joint activities] is to define some basic ground rules and prepare our people to participate successfully."

Most local leaders seem to fall in some middle ground—willing to experiment with joint efforts, often in a desperate quest to save jobs, but wary about how they operate. For example, there is profound anxiety about whipsawing even among pro-administration officers. Yet many leaders have been cowed by the heavy job losses of the past decade. "Only thing wrong with Mr. Tucker is his militancy," said delegate Brenda Tilley, who was voting for the administration-backed challenger to New Directions leader Jerry Tucker. "Anything he's for, a union person would be for, but it's not going to happen. People are just too scared."

Russell Cook, a shop committeeman and Bieber backer at a huge Buick local in Flint, Mich., says that by studying the company business plans and "by jointly sitting down

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Freed South African unionist thanks UAW

Last April, Moses Mayekiso, the 40-year-old leader of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, was acquitted of all charges of treason, subversion and sedition brought against him for organizing workers in the black township of Alexandra.

The judge's ruling not only spared him from the death penalty but also created new legal precedents for community and union organizers. And Mayekiso says flatly that the international campaign for his freedom, led in the U.S. by the UAW, "made us win the case." The Autoworkers mobilized mass membership letter-writing, rotating fasts and legal observer teams.

Now he is fighting the new Labor Rela-

tions Amendment Act that could fragment unions and subject them to extreme penalties for striking. But he has also returned to organizing for affordable housing and basic utilities in Alexandra.

Mayekiso's 190,000-member union doesn't trust the cold warriors at the AFL-CIO but works closely with the UAW, whose convention he addressed. The union's effective international work is a matter of both principle and self-interest. Adding labor rights provisions to trade bills and helping fledgling unions in countries like South Korea could not only help worldwide democratic unionism but also increase domestic markets in Third World auto-producing countries and reduce low-wage competition. —D.M.

By Jonathan Gill & Lisa Easterling

LOGAN, W.VA.

WHEN WEST VIRGINIA GOV. GASTON Caperton accepted an invitation to speak at the National Coal Association's 1989 convention, he wasn't too concerned about what to say. Coal production and profits were up after a nationwide slump in the early '80s, and Caperton brought with him the state's reputation as a playground for strip miners. But by the time he arrived at the luxurious Greenbrier resort in White Sulphur Springs on June 23, almost 50,000 coal miners in 10 states had walked off the job. They had done so in sympathy with about 1,900 Pittston Coal Group miners in West Virginia, Virginia and Kentucky who began striking in April after working for 14 months without a contract.

Caperton shot straight up the middle, offering to open his mansion on the banks of the Kanawha River in Charleston to round-the-clock negotiations between Pittston and the United Mine Workers of America (UMW)—as if the union and one of the country's biggest and most notorious coal companies were moral equivalents. UMW President Richard Trumka immediately accepted. Pittston refused.

The miners began settling in for a strike that will last, in their own words, as long as it takes. In recent years UMW members and their supporters have reacted to every coal strike with apocalyptic pronouncements about the demise of the union. But if the current wildcat strikes can't bring Pittston to a contract, the era when the UMW can stand up to the big coal operators at contract time might be over.

"If Pittston goes the way it wants to go, the majority of the union membership feels the UMW will collapse," says Roger Henry, a 14-year union veteran and one of the first wildcat strikers to walk off the job in the second week of June.

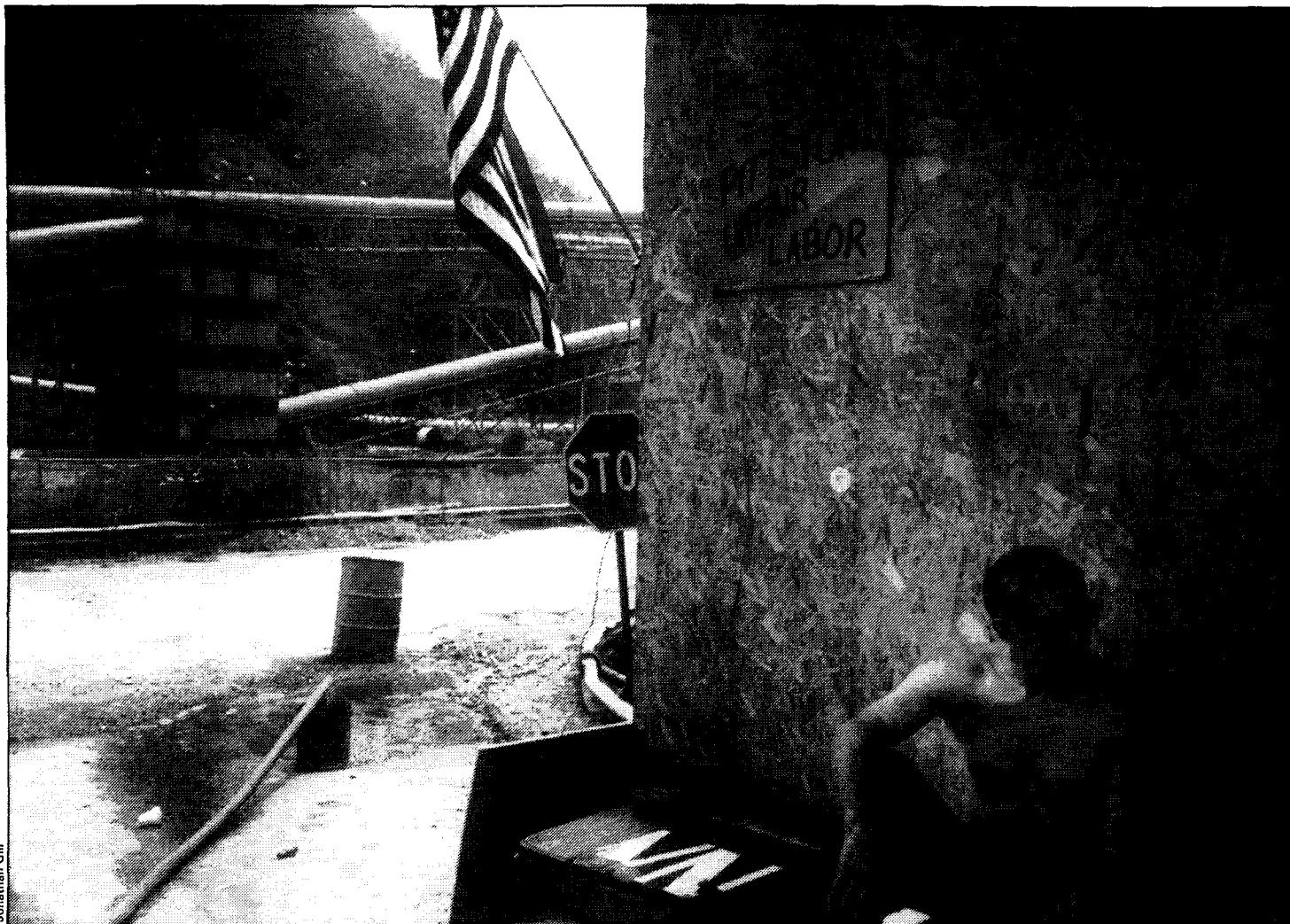
A resident of Logan, W.Va., Henry speaks for many of the miners who have walked off the job without pay in West Virginia, Alabama, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Virginia. "I've earned a good living in the coal mines," Henry says, watching his son get a haircut on a Saturday afternoon at the barbershop in this tiny coal town straddling the Guyandotte River in the heart of the Appalachian coalfields. "At the same time, I wouldn't want my child to work in the coal mines."

In two weeks off the job he's lost about \$2,000 in pay, but Henry won't go back to work until Pittston settles with the union.

Pittston's spark plug: The nation's biggest coal strike in almost a decade began when the union signed a national contract with the Bituminous Coal Operators Association in early 1988. Pittston refused to sign the contract, citing special needs for its labor force, and asked for a separate agreement with the union. As it turned out, those special needs included forcing miners to work unlimited overtime and eliminating contributions to the miners' pension fund.

Pittston miners continued to work under the terms of the old contract even when the company cut off medical benefits to retired and disabled miners and their widows. After 14 months—an extraordinary expression of good faith, because miners traditionally have refused to work without a contract—they donned camouflage and began sitting down in entrances to Pittston mines. Such acts of peaceful civil disobedience landed more

It's the Pittston for UMW strikers



Time out at the tippie: striking miner Jack Huff sit-pickets Pittston at Rum Creek, W.Va.

than 2,000 miners and their families in jail in Virginia and earned the union about \$3 million in fines.

On June 7 Pittston pulled out of federally mediated negotiations. The wildcat strikes began in West Virginia five days later and quickly spread to surrounding states. "Our government stands up and fights for freedom in Poland and China and Nicaragua," Trumka

LABOR

said at a union rally at the state capitol in Charleston hours before the wildcat strikes began. "Where are the cries of protest when it's an American worker having his or her rights trampled?"

As *In These Times* went to press, the strike didn't appear to be working. With the wildcat walkout entering its third week, Pittston hadn't been impressed by the display of solidarity within the UMW and had unilaterally imposed its own contract on the miners. And despite the fact that the coal industry has large stockpiles and plenty of non-union miners still at work, many of the companies hit by the wildcat strikes are fighting back. Hundreds of miners in several states are being fined and held in contempt of court for violating the clause in the national contract banning such strikes.

That has only increased tension in what has been a relatively peaceful strike so far. Some miners are arming themselves, claiming that the police and company guards have guns and aren't afraid to use them. By the wildcat strike's second week there were reports of gunfire on picket lines in Alabama and West Virginia.

"If they break the UMW, they're going to break the CIO and go right on down the line like dominoes," says Charles Hatfield, a retired union coal miner who left the mines with black lung disease after 35 years. He also has arthritis in his knees and spine from

spending days bent over in mine shafts. "If they don't get this thing settled it's gonna be another revolution, just like in the beginning."

Given the current state of the U.S. coal industry, the miners are—to paraphrase Albert Camus—fighting a lie in the name of a half-truth. Even if the mining and use of coal could be justified in terms of its environmental impact, union miners have no place in the coal industry's future. In recent years the industry has racked up record production levels and profits with fewer and fewer miners.

In 1987 the coal industry mined more than 915 million tons, close to a 40 percent increase in 10 years, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. But automation made it possible for half the number of workers—about 140,000—to do it, according to the U.S. Mine Safety and Health

If the spreading wildcat strikes can't bring the Pittston company to a contract, the era when the United Mineworkers can stand up to the big coal operators might be over. If Pittston wins, say miners, the union might just collapse.

Administration. And more and more of the jobs that remain are going to non-union miners.

Feeding the wildcats: The UMW has only about 65,000 members today, compared to almost half a million during World War II. Increasingly, the nation's coal is coming from non-union strongholds in the Midwest and the West. The federal government says Montana, Illinois and Wyoming make up for almost 60 percent of minable coal reserves.

Pittston President Paul Douglas, who lives in New York City, told *In These Times*, "We have no ambitions to see this issue become a great public debate about the position of labor and the position of this union. It's definitely not symbolic for Pittston."

About half of the country's United Mine Workers began their scheduled two-week vacations on June 23, so for now it's unclear how much pressure striking wildcat miners are putting on Pittston and other companies. Some say Pittston's spurning of Caperton's request is going to incite even more wildcat strikes and violence when the vacation period ends.

The miners themselves are ready for a long and possibly violent confrontation with the coal industry. Striking Pittston miner Rick Vance looks out from the picket shack across the street at the idled tipples and silos of the Elkay Mining Co., a Pittston subsidiary near Rum Creek, W.Va. He's convinced the wildcat strikes will grow and ultimately bring Pittston back to the bargaining table. He's not so sure what's going to happen after that.

"It was handed to us on a silver platter," says Vance, whose father worked the mines during the years the union made the gains it's now struggling to keep. "We're just trying to hang on." □

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