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**Bert**

# **“We are dinosaurs!”**

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[http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L300xH192/Manif\\_23-3-10\\_6549-4b7aa-48f9b.jpg](http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L300xH192/Manif_23-3-10_6549-4b7aa-48f9b.jpg)

That, in part, explains why so many voted for Obama. Obama and Sarah Palin would both let Wall Street run the economy and the CIA and Pentagon run the empire. But Palin represents a dangerous Christian right resting on the tradition of white workers' hatred, whether it focuses today on Blacks, gays, or women (abortion). It is not to defend Obama, but the vote itself has significance for a large number of people. Sure, many with illusions about Obama promises – choosing not to go back to that tradition.

<http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L274xH223/iww-2-76c91.jpg>

These comments about the tradition of French workers – that sort of collective memory underlying the search for a way forward – clarify certain differences in the situation in France and the United States. This collective memory is not just past history but still right under the surface. White workers defend it, secretly admire some of it, wish for it to come back, or at least let the memory lie there, untouched. As for us, we are not like the Germans, who supposedly have come to terms with their genocide. We do not acknowledge that we live on Indian land, and the closer we get to having to confront that, out West (the Dakotas, Montana, etc.), the more we hate the Indian. We do not acknowledge that Black unemployment is always – good times or bad – double that of whites, or that whites still have privilege due to past slavery. White family wealth is more than double that of Blacks.

I remember a white fellow worker, when I was new on a job and working very hard to compensate for my lack of experience and seniority, pulling me aside and saying, "Why are you working that hard? You are not Black!" I really needed that job, and it took me a long time to understand what he meant. What that white worker said to me is part of the secret conversation among whites. In front of Black fellow workers, they talk different, and we all get along together fine.

The great fear of white workers is that Obama will "give something" to "the Blacks" – or the Indians (or the Mexicans?). They fear this more than they fear AIG or GM or Goldman Sachs. There is also a secret fear caused by guilt – will there come a day when white workers are treated the same as Blacks? When Blacks and Indians and Mexicans will be the majority and turn the tables on whites, treating them the same way they were treated by them? This fear that "the Blacks" will get something has paralyzed "progressive" politics throughout our history. That is why we have no health care, and will not get it.

The amazing thing is that for once white workers, at the behest of their unions, voted on a perceived class (economic) interest for the Black guy. Now the danger is that Obama has betrayed them and they will return to their tradition with a vengeance. The opposition to Obama is from the right-wing "populists" known as Tea-Baggers. (Gun and ammunition sales hit a record after the election, by the way. Only in the US!!) The Republican Party is a party of angry white men, fearful of losing their privilege, based in the South of slavery, segregation – that is their tradition.

<http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L340xH276/Afl-cio-2-45990.jpg>

I agree that the capitalist crisis is not the signal for its collapse but the form of its regulation. Looking back, the first "oil shock" (1973) and paying for the Vietnam war resulted in the first "concessions" (give-back) contracts by the unions at Chrysler and NY City Transit (subways, busses). That new stage was then accelerated by Reagan firing the air traffic controllers and breaking their union, PATCO (1980).

That logic reaches us today with the latest crisis. Now there will be no more pensions – that is the goal of the new crisis/regulation.

At Yellow Roadway Corporation (YRC, the merger of Roadway and Yellow, the global trucking giant I work for, with some 40,000 unionized workers and many more non-union), the Teamsters Union has "given back" 15% of wages to "save our jobs." That is the old concessions contract, of 1975-1980's vintage. Not so new. And we, workers, know that every single company to which the union gave a wage back eventually closed anyway – only with more of our money in their pockets. We all say, when they ask for your dollar out of your pocket so they can stay in business, it is over! Concessions don't work. Don't do it. Let them shut the door. We in the US do not think of occupation; the recent case of Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago, in which the now tiny communist union UE played a role, was an exception.

It used to be that when one trucking company shut the door, we would get a job at another company, in the same union, under the same conditions and union pension. This is my third unionized trucking company, friends have shut down 3 or 4. But today companies are consolidating and putting their competitors out of business. YRC is the last unionized freight carrier, except for the smaller ABF who do not hire.

Our local union has the pension fund (and the medical). This was good when there were 35 different companies all paying into it. That meant you could change jobs and your pension followed you. When you had 25 years in all – it didn't matter in how many companies – you retired at any age, and with medical insurance for you and your family. Guys would retire at 45, 50 years old, go do something else. That's when it was a "good union job." The money was never considered that great. Guys took the job for the pension.

In a way, we knew 20 years ago the end was coming – we used to say, we are dinosaurs, as we saw all the unionized freight companies close. We knew this day would come but viewed it as inevitable, passively, as though there was no way to stop it.

And so the company demanded, with a gun to our heads, not only 15% in wages, but to stop paying the pension. That is a concession no company had ever asked before – and the union gave it to them! YRC pays 80% of the pension funds into our local now. If YRC shuts down, it is not just that we lose our jobs. The pension will go broke, and not only we but every member of our local who is receiving a pension will lose it.

Of course, the union was damned either way. One could argue that there was no choice. About 40% voted no – one terminal of New Penn voted no overwhelmingly and was told they would be shut down, and were forced to vote again. The big Chicago break bulk voted no, and one in Canada – British Columbia – and they were shut down and the freight run around them. I voted no to the concessions, and others did, as a matter of principle, knowing this is a bare-faced, bold transfer of wealth from the workers to the CEO's and banks to fund their golden parachutes.

The boss of YRC, William Zollars, who brought the company to the brink of bankruptcy with all his stupid business decisions over these years, cannot be fired because he has a \$14 million "golden parachute" – they have to pay him \$14 million to leave!! This would be a comedy if it wasn't hurting so many people. If Zollars gets \$14 million, there have to be others who get their \$11, 9, 7 million, no? And they have to make sure to fund that before they go out of business, with our pension money, which is about \$780 million in one year, if I remember right. But the union was faced with accepting this transfer of wealth, this robbery, or lose the pensions even of those who retired years ago.

So today we are to work for \$600 a week after taxes, and NO PENSION! And the medical benefits get worse every few months as the union runs out of money and must get cheaper and cheaper insurance plans. If work is slow (and it is very slow with this economy), if you lose more than one day of work a week, you lose your medical insurance for

yourself and the family for 3 months, until you work enough to qualify again! We have nowhere to go to preserve the pension and medical benefits that go with the job.

Essentially we are being told shut up, you are lucky to have a job, work with no pension, no medical, and not enough money to pay a decent rent in New York. Workers actually do say, "Well, we are lucky to have a job these days." And the union (the Union boss Hoffa, the "International" in D.C.) says, "We appreciate the sacrifices you made, we want you to know how hard we are working with the banks and the creditors to save good jobs." The joke is, the jobs they "saved" are no longer good jobs. Good union jobs, indeed!

As I said, guys used to take this job just for the pension. Already, we had lost the medical benefits for those who retired early. I have friends who were ready to retire with 25 years and 30 years pensions, who continue working only for the medical benefits because their families need it. Now, we no longer earn pension. When we retire, the previous years we accumulated will be there (like when I turn 65 I should have 11 years pension) – supposedly – but only if YRC does not close, and begins to fund the pension again, WHICH OBVIOUSLY WILL NOT HAPPEN! So, no more pensions, which is what happened to the steelworkers in the 80's and 90's.

With the recession, state and city pensions all over the country are running huge deficits – New York California, etc. Again, these are jobs workers take for the pensions. And you know now these pensions will be cut.

So that in one way this crisis is regulating us – no more pensions. Of course, George Bush tried to cut social security old age pensions (minimal pensions, not enough to live on, but all that will be left to us) by privatizing them in stock market investments. He was not able to, but that will come with the next crisis. I know there are billionaires on Wall St. who cannot sleep at night thinking of all the money in social security that could also be in their hands.

I think the unions arose as a response to (a growing) industrial capitalism and have been dying, disappearing, along with the industries they fought to "get a bigger piece of the pie." The reformist project depended on a growing industry to get more for the workers. So I have been wrong to blame the leaders for not knowing how to fight, not being militant enough. The whole union project was tied to a time in US capitalism that is no more. It is not enough to blame the leaders and proclaim militance, it is a moment where we have to rethink everything. I only hope in the US we don't rethink in the way of the "tea-baggers"...

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