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Keeping GM Van Nuys Open

Abstract

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But, as we will describe, recent efforts by General Motors, representatives of our International union, and a company-oriented faction of our local have been pursuing a strategy of competition with other UAW locals to try to save our plant at the expense of others. If this strategy of "company-unionism" succeeds over the strategy of community-based demands for corporate responsibility, then once again a declining labor movement will have rescued corporate greed from the jaws of defeat.

Keywords

Van Nuys, UAW, General Motors, company-unionism, community



Keeping GM Van Nuys Open

■ *Eric Mann*

For the past four years, UAW Local 645 has been carrying out a bold campaign to stop a plant closing before it happens—in this case, the General Motors Assembly Plant in Van Nuys, California. I've been asked to analyze our movement from the perspective of regional economic planning.

In most of my experience, "regional planning" has been a highly utopian undertaking. Well-meaning intellectuals dream, "Let's see, we can put the solar-paneled factory over there, right next to the workers' recreation and child-care center." In reality, American capitalism is going through one of its most decadent and anarchistic periods in history. In the age of Reagan Republicans and neo-Reagan Democrats, any form of rational and democratic planning is attacked as violating free enterprise, while the inherently anti-social tendencies of corporations are now out of control. Working people are suffering as profitable plants are closed in pursuit of even greater profits, as the captains of industry become captains of megamergers, paper transactions, and the heralded transition to the "information and service economy"—captains of destroying our nation's industrial infrastructure. In this

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frightening context, how does the labor movement even begin to raise any issues of democratic economic planning?

In Van Nuys, for the past four years, we have been building a movement of our own local union, the Chicano and black communities, clergy, intellectuals, students and small businesspeople to demand that General Motors keep open a profitable plant it has threatened to close. The basic premise of the struggle—that we do not recognize GM's plant as "private property" but see it as a "joint venture" between capital, labor and minority communities—flies in the face of GM's worldview and the dominant business ideology of the times. Our impressive organizing successes indicate that a revitalized labor movement can rebuild powerful coalitions in opposition to big business. It is a small, but hopeful, example of grass-roots regional planning—from the bottom up.

But, as we will describe, recent efforts by General Motors, representatives of our International union, and a company-oriented faction of our local have been pursuing a strategy of competition with other UAW locals to try to save our plant at the expense of others. If this strategy of "company-unionism" succeeds over the strategy of community-based demands for corporate responsibility, then once again a declining labor movement will have rescued corporate greed from the jaws of defeat.

Early History of the Campaign

The Campaign to Keep GM Van Nuys Open has been a conscious organizing strategy from the beginning. From 1980 to 1982, five out of California's six auto plants were closed, over 21,000 workers lost their jobs, and Van Nuys was the last plant remaining. The Campaign was initiated by UAW members with backgrounds in the civil rights, Chicano and Asian-American movements, who came together in our local's Political Action Committee.

The Big Three were carrying out a regional disinvestment strategy. They decided it was cheaper to produce virtually all their cars from a centralized midwestern hub, shipping completed cars throughout the U.S., rather than produce parts in the midwest, ship them to Van Nuys to be assembled, and then "back ship" completed cars east of the Rockies.

But how did they back ship all these years and still make a profit? We were told that GM was still making a substantial profit in Van Nuys, but that, given foreign competition and a surplus of plant capacity, it was having a competition to see which plants could be most profitable, with the less profitable being closed.

We countered this argument on two levels. First, we opposed

"profit maximization" strategies. We do not think the labor movement should be chasing after corporations to constantly provide answers to how to make corporations like GM, with over \$4 billion in profits the past two years, even more profitable. That only provides the justification for plant closings, layoffs, and speedups.

But we also came up with a plan, in conjunction with business students at UCLA and small businesspeople from the Chamber of Commerce. We demanded that GM build a stamping plant in Los Angeles, hiring laid-off Southgate and Bethlehem workers, and that it purchase more parts from local contractors. This would solve GM's problem of just assembling the cars on the west coast; now, virtually the entire car could be built in California and targeted for a west coast market. This has won more allies to our side, and put GM on the defensive. But how could we provide the "muscle" to enforce these ideas?

After months of discussion, we agreed on an exciting strategy we believed could save our plant. While GM openly admitted they wanted to get out of Los Angeles, it coveted the Southern California auto market, the largest new car market in the United States. If we could build a pre-emptive movement to effectively threaten a boycott of General Motors products in greater Los Angeles, and could convince GM of the viability of that threat, we could head off the closing. Our plan was to organize a greater metropolitan market of over 10 million people to support our demands.

Key Elements of our Coalition

Building a movement far ahead of a plant closing gives the organizers strategic initiative. But it lacks some of the urgency of a movement built after the company announces the closing.

Initially many of the workers felt, "It's GM's plant." Traditional trade union practice had convinced many workers that the union's only role was to negotiate over *the terms* of the closure. But when we explained that the workers had contributed decades of profits to GM, that surrounding communities had developed stores, homes and social services based on GM's permanency, and that they purchased many GM products—we convinced many workers that the UAW and the community should have a voice in the future of the plant.

A second round of doubts then surfaced: "Maybe we should just leave GM alone, since provoking them will only bring the closing sooner," and "GM will never let anyone tell them what to do with

their money, they're too big, we can't win." Finally, we found a core of workers who believed in both the morality and strategy of the Campaign and who felt that at least it was worth a try. Most of these workers were veterans of other closed-down industrial plants, where they had seen doubts and indecision lead to human suffering and an impotent union response.

Pete Beltran, our local President, began at GM in his early 20's on the assembly line. Now in his mid-40's, he is a self-educated man with a sophisticated understanding of labor history, labor law, and the internal machinations of union politics. Unlike the growing epidemic of "cooperative" local union leaders, Beltran is not intimidated by GM management, and was in tune with an activist and confrontational response to GM's corporate blackmail. While skeptical about the Campaign's prospects in the early stages, he felt it was worth a try, and was willing to give its organizers the full support of his office.

While there are always many elements in the community a union can reach out to, a successful coalition has to have a strong core. We targeted the black and Chicano communities to help us build our Campaign.

Twenty years after the Watts rebellions of 1966, black unemployment in South Central Los Angeles has remained virtually unchanged. The main culprits—the closing of Bethlehem Steel, Goodyear and Firestone Rubber, and GM's Southgate plant. These plants provided good paying unionized jobs, and their workers were stable and creative members of the community. When some 1,000 Southgate workers were able to transfer to Van Nuys, many groups in the black community vowed that GM would not close them out a second time.

Los Angeles has a Latino community of over 3 million people, the greatest concentration of whom are Mexican-Americans. Many of the top officers of UAW Local 645 are active in the Mexican-American Political Association (MAPA) and various Latino labor coalitions. The local has actively defended the rights of undocumented workers and has initiated organizing drives among low-paid immigrant workers in surrounding sweatshops. Thus, the local's outward political stance has won it many allies, who were willing to take on General Motors.

Central to our strategy was that the existing relations between labor unions, corporations, and both political parties were causes of the problems of plant closings. We had to find constituencies who were outside of this "gentlemen's agreement" who could help find the solution. Over several years of organizing, we built strong relationships with leaders in the Baptist Ministers Conference,



...UAW Local 645 rally in 1984.

individual Catholic priests, MAPA, and the Rainbow Coalition—forces with strong activist histories, the networks to carry out effective boycotts, and their own independent interests in keeping our plant open.

Initial Successes

The action component of the strategy was kicked off when GM laid off our second shift in November 1982 and threatened to close the whole plant. We began a series of large and militant rallies and marches, with the threat of the boycott as the central theme. An angry group of second shift workers fueled the early stages of the Campaign.

When the second shift returned in the spring of 1983, our strategy had already evolved towards greater community emphasis. Through months of organizing by teams of UAW members, we brought more than 200 key representatives of church, labor and minority communities to a Community Leadership Meeting that demanded a face-to-face discussion with either GM Chairman

Roger Smith or President F. James McDonald.

Our friends in the media said it was a brilliant ploy, because GM would look bad when they didn't show, but no one believed GM would meet with the coalition. When U.S. Congressman Howard Berman, the coalition's liaison, met with Roger Smith to set up the meeting, Smith expressed anger at the constant talk of a boycott. But precisely because the coalition was a completely separate entity from the union, and was not something GM could handle within the collective bargaining apparatus, GM decided to meet with the labor-community coalition.

At the meeting in January 1984, President McDonald boldly asserted GM's management rights, and made it clear the plant was in danger of being closed. The coalition, in equally bold style, went into great detail about its commitment to carry out the boycott and its members' past track record at successful boycotts. McDonald left the meeting somewhat shaken.

As we were leaving the room, Assemblywoman Maxine Waters (along with Congressman Berman, one of the few elected officials to have won the confidence of our members) confronted McDonald, and asked if she could tell the press that the plant would be there for at least two more years. McDonald paused, and then said, "Yes." Maxine pushed the point, "Can I tell the press three more years?" McDonald said, "No. 1986 is when we have to make some hard decisions." Maxine turned to the coalition members and said, "Now here I am in the legislature trying to get 90 days' advance notice on plant closings, and they say my bill is 'too radical.' But our coalition just got two years' advance notice from GM."

Word quickly spread through the plant that we had won a two-year commitment, and the prestige of the Campaign mounted. But it also led to a letdown among many of our supporters— "call me in a year and a half; I need my weekends to recuperate." We wanted to keep the most active workers involved, since you can't allow a movement to fall apart and then just revitalize it at will.

A politically committed filmmaker, Michal Goldman, encouraged us to make a film about our movement. *Tiger by the Tail* has become an award-winning documentary, and has been valuable both in telling our story to community groups in the Los Angeles area and in encouraging similar union campaigns in other parts of the country. Our plan was to go into a phase of slow-but-steady community outreach, awaiting the next crisis. The next crisis came sooner than expected.

After the McDonald meeting, GM changed its strategy towards the local. They brought in a new, highly manipulative plant

manager, Ernie Schaefer, skilled in the double-talk of the new non-adversarial labor relations. Schaefer denied the plant was in trouble and blamed all the talk about a possible plant closing on "those who would try to benefit from spreading negativity."

Then in November 1985, when trade newspapers began to print articles that GM was again planning a series of closings and Van Nuys was high on the "danger list," Schaefer began to spread a little negativity of his own. In memos to the workforce, he told us that GM had no car for our plant past the 1988 model, and that if we did not accept "new cooperative labor relations," the so-called "team concept," GM would not even consider a new model and would close the plant.

Our Shop Chairman Ray Ruiz endorsed the plan as the best way to save the plant—arguing that the Campaign had become outmoded. President Beltran did not directly oppose the team concept, but he focused on the Campaign's demand for a 10-year commitment. If General Motors wanted cooperation, the first step was to make that 10-year commitment. He also argued that rather than being outmoded, the Campaign was the only thing that gave us any leverage in these discussions.

GM Splits the Local

GM took the position that the team concept must be passed without conditions, as GM was not in the business of making long-term commitments. A vote on the team concept was only an entry fee into the lottery to keep plants open.

What followed was one of the dirtiest efforts I've witnessed. The company began a systematic slander campaign, with strong support from the "cooperation faction" of the union. GM argued that Beltran's militancy, not its greed, would lead to the plant being closed.

A supposed "Quality of Worklife" publication, *The Night Owl*, openly argued that we were in a "Super Bowl against the Norwood team" (Norwood is our Ohio sister plant that also produces Camaros and Firebirds), and that if we did not vote for the team concept, Norwood would win the "game." We argued that instead of uniting local unions against General Motors, this approach would make our union a confederation of locals competing against each other to see whose plant will be closed.

The company's new demands left us disoriented. If we were in a new plant in the midwest, we would clearly have taken a strong stand against the team concept—which is actually a plan to eliminate jobs, speed up the line, and get workers to adopt



Jesse Jackson and Ed Asner express solidarity with UAW Local 645 President Pete Beltran (right) and Eric Mann (left).

management attitudes and impose "peer pressure" on each other to work harder and faster. But we were the ones who had emphasized the grave danger of the plant closing, and there was a growing chorus from the press attacking Beltran and arguing that the workers should either "Change or Die"—that is, accept the company's proposal or deserve to be closed. We were afraid that if we led the opposition and won, the company would then use the "no" vote as the excuse to close the plant. But if we acquiesced, the union would be structurally weakened and a later fight against a closing would be even harder. To make things worse, under growing pressure from Detroit, the Regional UAW, which had previously been sympathetic to the Campaign, became actively involved in the negotiations and made it clear that a "team" agreement was the way to save the plant.

I must have talked to over 200 workers to try to find my bearings and understand how they were seeing it. The overwhelming consensus argued:

"Look. It's blackmail. But we should vote for it. If the 'team concept' is unbearable we can always vote it out later. And if it's not as bad as we expect, and we get a new car, at least we'll have our jobs. And if they double-cross us, and close the plant anyway, I'll be the first one on the picket line for the boycott."

But while that logic was seductive, the growing viciousness of the campaign against those of us who opposed it contradicted that view. Anonymous leaflets vented slanderous personal attacks on Pete, Mike Gomez (our Political Action chair) and myself, and argued that we would be responsible for the plant's closing.

The short-term result of this company campaign, with internal union support, was that a slate of delegates who supported the team concept were overwhelmingly elected as delegates to the UAW Convention, and Pete was defeated.

A week after Pete's defeat, the Campaign held a rally we had been planning for four months. On the surface, it was our most successful rally. Over 1,000 people came, and it once again reflected the enormous breadth of our support in Los Angeles. But our movement was in trouble.

The press was gloating over the fact that Pete had lost the delegate election, and was implying that he was a lame-duck president. The press thought that the growing split in our local was a much better story than our continuing Campaign to pressure GM for a commitment. And to some degree they were right, because GM's main goal has been to get rid of Beltran, to stop the Campaign, and to bring this whole issue of plant closings back to where it belongs—as a powerful tool for management control, not one for labor organizing.

It Ain't Over Till It's Over

One thing I have learned in several decades of organizing is that victories and defeats don't linger long, and that history is a constantly changing process.

The union "cooperation team," arrogant with its election victory, tried to push through the "team concept" vote without giving the workers contract language in writing. Pete Beltran spoke against the agreement, arguing to the Regional leadership that if they thought these team agreements were so good, they should make them part of the upcoming national contract, which the membership could vote up or down, rather than imposing them on locals one at a time with the threat of a plant closing hanging over them. The "team concept" was only passed 53% to 47%, and many people I spoke to who grudgingly voted for it told me they came away from the meetings with enormous respect for Beltran's courage. Those who believe they will defeat Beltran for president this May, which is now the company's main objective, may be very surprised at the outcome.

The second shift, which provided the main margin to pass the

"team concept," did so out of a real sense of their greater vulnerability. GM showed its appreciation by laying off the second shift July 3, with rumors that the layoff might be quite long.

Our supporters in the community keep up their excellent work. Reverend Dick Gillett has formed a new group called Work, Economics and Religion, and is doing extensive outreach, especially to Protestant clergy. Peter Olney, a long-time activist and a student at UCLA's Graduate School of Management, has prepared an important field study on the feasibility of the boycott. If GM executives read the report, they will have trouble dismissing the results. Professor Rudy Acuna, with deep ties to Chicano faculty and students throughout the southwest, is speaking and writing about GM's arrogance towards the Chicano community and its browbeating of a predominantly Chicano workforce.

Now that General Motors has decided to play a heavy hand in the affairs of our local, and to use its threat of a plant closing so overtly and systematically, there is no doubt that America's largest industrial corporation will win some short-term victories against a single union local of 4,000 members. But while many workers are discussing shopfloor strategies to counter GM's growing intimidation within the plant, GM's strongest suit is the *threat* of the plant closing, not its actuality. If GM ever closes down the Van Nuys plant, there is at least a realistic historical possibility that the payback will be substantial. As Father Luis Olivares, one of our strongest community allies, expressed it:

"It's quite possible that General Motors, in its imperial arrogance, will not take the Coalition seriously enough to change their plans. My worst fear is they will play with the workers for a few years, and then after squeezing out everything they can, close down the plant anyway. If that happens, we will have no choice but to carry out the boycott, and show GM it made a serious miscalculation. Then, in the future, when people stand up against these companies, and talk about boycotts, they will remember the Van Nuys movement and think twice before they close a plant." ■