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January, 2009

Why they want to kill the motor industry

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/niman/102/

Why they want to kill the motor industry

Mikael I. Niman tells why the Republicans will sacrifice the US auto industry in their bid to kill off the labor unions

Let me begin by reminding readers that I have no love for the Big Three automakers. These are the people who purposefully bought and killed mass transit systems in the 1940s, engineered planned obsolescence in the 1950s and 1960s, and knowingly sold deadly cars in the 1970s when their number-crunchers figured it was cheaper to pay a few wrongful death settlements then to issue a safety recall. These were the folks who faced down catastrophic climate change in the 1980s and 1990s with a plethora of SUVs. And no, I don't buy into the Nuremberg defense that they were "just filling orders." GM manufactured not only Hummers but the demand for Hummer as well, spending millions targeting the Viagra crowd with a hard sell for instant manhood packaged in steel.

People bought their Excursions and Commanders because the Big Three wrapped them in an aura of power and privilege, using sophisticated ad campaigns to transform the reviled suburban assault vehicle of the 1970s into the sexy, hip, new-school SUV of the 1990s. Then, long after the writing was on the wall, they bet the house on their perpetual popularity. In 2007, as hybrids and mini-cars gained traction in the market, Chrysler killed their last small car, the Neon, leaving them with no fuel-efficient products when gas prices soared a year later.

Many of our environmental and social problems, ranging from our asphalt-choked cities, our dysfunctional mass transit systems, peak oil, and resource wars, to smog and suburban sprawl, can be laid near the doorstep of these three mega-corporations. So of course I didn't respond when GM sent me an email last month asking me to call my congressional reps and voice my support for the auto industry.

But then came the Republicans. I never liked the auto industry, but suddenly the Republicans, the party of corporate subsidies and tax breaks, the folks who just gave amounts of money we can't comprehend to a corporations like AIG, whose actual business we can't quite figure out, suddenly has found mega-corporations it doesn't like. Something stinks here.

The issue is not the Big Three. Bought-and-paid-for Republicans from the White House down to the stinky bathrooms of the Capitol have always stepped up to whore for the auto industry when it came to combating safety regulations and environmental safeguards like fuel mileage standards. But suddenly that romance is over. The industry that mobilized to arm the Allied powers (and the Nazis too) during the Second World War, America's last industrial powerhouse, an industry vital to our national defense, can go to hell. I

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mean, what the fuck, I'm cool with it – but I never would have expected such radicalism from the party of Ronald Reagan and the Bushes.

The Republican Party's problem is not with the corporations, it's with their workers and what auto workers in America have come to represent. Ultimately, their problem is with the workers' union, the UAW, American labor's last man standing.

To hear the corporate right noise machine on Fox News and talk radio, auto workers comprise some sort of shadow government with magical powers to tax working schmucks toiling away honestly at Wal-Marts and Starbucks, in order to support their undeserved status as hangers-on in America's doomed middle class. How dare they militantly defend their living wages and healthcare during the dark, dank Reagan, Clinton, and Bush eras. Who do they think they are?

How bullied we as a nation have become. There was a time when auto workers, like other American workers, enjoyed a sojourn in the middle class, with all the social and economic security that entailed. Gains achieved by unionized auto workers trickled throughout the economy, creating the most thriving middle class the world had ever seen. The unionized auto industry pushed up wages in surrounding locales. You didn't have to work at Wal-Mart for eight dollars an hour back when GM was hiring.

Then came free trade and the race to the bottom. One by one, unionized, living-wage-paying industries fell to duty-free foreign competition. The playing field was anything but level. As the cost of providing healthcare to employees skyrocketed in the US, with greedy healthcare corporations selling life-or-death treatments in an unregulated and often monopolized market, foreign manufacturers in industrial countries enjoyed a government-sponsored reprieve from such costs thanks to universal healthcare systems – which are in place in every developed nation except this one. Manufacturers in repressive third world countries enjoyed even greater competitive advantages by paying starvation wages in sweatshop conditions.

During this dark period, the UAW hung in there, protecting what became the last major bastion of middle class industrial jobs. This is what I mean by the "last man standing." Rather than look to the UAW and the auto workers as sources of inspiration during the dark times ushered in by Reagan, beaten-down American workers, struggling to survive on multiple McJobs, instead regarded higher-paid UAW workers with jealousy. Led by false prophets like Rush Limbaugh, their anger was misdirected at their fellow workers who were faring better than them, rather than at their employers, who were stealing their poorly compensated labor.

Now let's look at the UAW. They were often at the cutting edge of the labor, civil rights, and peace movements. They co-sponsored the 1963 March on Washington at a time when much of America lived under apartheid-like racial segregation. They bailed Martin Luther King, Jr. out of jail, forced segregated factories to end their racist hiring policies, and, in the heyday of the auto industry, became one of the main paths for poor, economically discriminated against blacks to migrate into the middle class. During the Vietnam war, the UAW broke ranks with most of the American labor movement, and opposed the war that was claiming the lives of young auto workers, rather than acquiesce to military spending that was "good for business." In the 1970s, the UAW unsuccessfully campaigned for higher fuel efficiency, hoping to save both their industry and the environment.

The UAW in many ways stood as the political antithesis to the reactionary Republican agenda ushered in by the so-called "Reagan Revolution." This is why the bail-out-silly Republicans today are so eager to risk sinking what's left of the country's industrial economy just to execute a sloppy

hit against the UAW. The auto industry is collateral damage. National security is collateral damage, as we turn to Toyota and Mercedes to mechanize our future military. The three million mostly non-union jobs associated with the auto industry could be collateral damage. This is how bad the Republican party wants to destroy the union that may have delivered Ohio and Michigan to Barack Obama. This is how bad they want to punish those Rust Belt blue states that cost them the White House. This is what this fight is all about – both old and recent vendettas.

Much of what we're now hearing in the corporate media about the UAW is simply not accurate. UAW members average, for example, about $28 per hour in wages – not the $70 bandied about in the media. This figure is competitive with the $24 or so that foreign auto companies pay their American workers. That $70 figure supposedly includes $42 per hour in benefits. This would amount to $87,000 per year per worker. It's simply not accurate.

The UAW also led the way in forcing employers to cover the costs of the social safety net that is now bankrupting many American counties and states. Laid-off UAW workers receive most of their salary, paid for by the company and not the state. Small government conservatives should like this – though it seems that the meaner-spirited among them would just as soon see unemployed folks living on the streets selling apples. The problem with this arrangement isn't that UAW workers won it; as with many of the union's other accomplishments, it's that no other industry followed suit, leaving auto workers standing alone, scorned by Rush's Dittoheads and targeted by Republicans.

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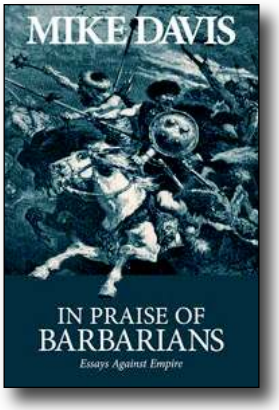

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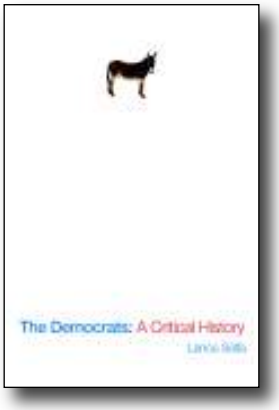

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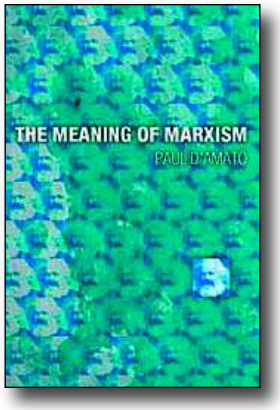

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