



## Auto Worker Recalls Reform Efforts



## Lessons from Fighting Times

by Jon Melrod

In the early 1970s, just out of college, I moved to Milwaukee and began a 13-year saga of working and organizing in industry.

I landed a job at a small factory, where I soon confronted the transition from student to worker. I was assigned to clean a vat caked with a carcinogenic chemical used to burn grease off metal.

Gasping for air, lungs burning, dizzy and nauseous, I asked for a respirator and was told, "Respirators are for 'senoritas.'" The campus now far behind, I bit my lip.

**I learned that tactical alliances are often necessary to move union reform forward.**

In May 1972, I hired on at the large American Motors Corporation assembly plant in Milwaukee. The AMC locals (Local 75 in Milwaukee and Local 72 in Kenosha) were outliers in the United Auto Workers and had fought for decades to maintain the right to strike over all grievances; voluntary overtime; and one steward for every 35 workers—a trio of rights infinitely stronger than any Big 3 auto contract provided.

My first nine months unveiled three key lessons. The first: how to establish oneself as a leader and take-no-guff union militant.

On my 62nd day, two days after joining Local 75, I walked off the line when

I didn't get my relief break. The supervisor fired me; moments later, my steward instructed me to return to my job. Out of the box I gained respect and set my sights on becoming a steward.

Lesson two: When management, in cahoots with the local union president, scheduled Saturday overtime, I learned to harness spontaneous anger. I xeroxed the contract provision that made all overtime voluntary and got word out on the shop floor.

Spontaneous resistance began, with mass refusals; overtime was canceled. Young workers, of which there were hundreds, learned the power of collective action. I earned the wrath of the local president.

Three: Although spontaneity worked for the first mass struggle, we needed organization. I pulled together the Fight Back Caucus. There were 10 of us, mostly young Vietnam War vets, workers of color, and women, and we began to meet regularly.

### RIDE THE LINE

AMC's sales grew hot and management announced a line speed-up with no additional manpower to pick up the extra work. Fight Back issued our first flier at the gates. Senior workers taught younger workers how to *ride the line*—i.e. to only work at a contractual "normal pace."

The repair stations and roof filled with half-built car bodies. The company retreated and hired additional workers.

Management, in cahoots with the

local president and his cronies, initiated a rumor campaign that I was an infiltrator from Students for a Democratic Society, affiliated with the Black Panther Party, and a commie. I was fired.

Senior workers counseled me to refuse arbitration and rely on the membership to vote to strike to secure my rehiring. When the membership meeting came, hundreds attended. The president falsely claimed the hand counter had broken, and ruled that we lost the ensuing voice vote.

The National Labor Relations Board administrative law judge ordered my reinstatement and blasted AMC for McCarthy-like tactics. Management strategized with the FBI, insisting the company wouldn't abide by the decision. It was two and a half years until the 7th Circuit finally ordered me rehired. I learned that sometimes you can utilize government agencies to your advantage.

### A JURY OF OUR PEERS

Six months after being reinstated, I was among 350 transferred to the Kenosha plant. I focused on building the existing Fighting Times caucus and its newsletter, an irreverent voice for the rank and file.

*Fighting Times* became so successful in confronting management, particularly over egregious acts of racism and sexism, that Detroit corporate management surreptitiously funded and orchestrated supervisors to sue us for defamation, claiming damages of \$4.2 million. The NLRB sought to block the

litigation, but the trial went forward and became national news.

We produced dozens of witnesses to attest that every article was true. The pro-company, red-baiting judge ruled that we had defamed two plaintiffs—but the working-class jury rebuffed the judge and awarded \$0 damages.

The NLRB, meanwhile, found that AMC had violated labor law by funding the suit, interfering with our right to protest wages, hours, and working conditions. The Board ordered AMC to pay us more than \$200,000 to cover our legal fees and lost wages. In the end, the trial was a national victory for free speech in the workplace.

### NO GRIEVANCE TOO SMALL

I was soon elected steward and department chair in Trim. I used my position to reinvigorate the trim department's most basic democratic institution: monthly meetings. By handing out agendas and making meetings relevant, attendance grew from a mere handful who came to drink beer to 80 per meeting.

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As department chair, I emphasized militancy and transparency. With 12 stewards on the first shift alone, we policed the contract eight hours a day. No grievance was too small or insignificant and we reported on the resolution of each one!

When the white chief steward engaged in an overtly racist and sexist rumor-mongering campaign, I put the issue of his behavior on the agenda. For the first time, our department's Black workers rallied to attend the meeting; they raked him over the coals till he squeaked out an apology.

Since inception, standing up to racism on the job and in the broader society was a core mission of *Fighting Times*. Local 72 even won the first paid day off in the UAW to honor the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 1980 contract negotiations, a victory that was soon replicated at the Big 3 and elsewhere.

Another lesson I learned was that tactical alliances are often necessary to move union reform forward. *Fighting Times* joined and promoted a grassroots movement to overthrow the corrupt

Local 72 president (who was backed by the UAW International) and replace him with a "reform candidate" who wasn't our ideal choice. The candidate won and appointed caucus members to committees where we could play a more substantial role.

After I was appointed to the Education Committee, I organized a seven-week labor school that covered the history of Local 72 (founded by radicals, socialists, and communists), the impact of multinationals on the bargaining process (important as French automaker Renault had acquired a stake in AMC), women's role in the union, and basic contract enforcement. Most members came to understand that we were part of an international class of workers employed by Renault worldwide.

### NO CONCESSIONS

UAW members entered contract negotiations in 1982 with the sword of Damocles hanging over us. Auto sales had slumped to the worst levels in 20 years. The UAW International, running point for the employers, unleashed a pressure campaign to force concessions, arguing that the existing wages and benefits would lead to further job losses and plant closures. Despite the efforts of anti-concessions activists, workers at Chrysler, Ford, and GM accepted wage and benefit cuts in exchange for illusive promises of job security.

Due to our history of militant opposition to any givebacks, Renault/AMC disguised its takeaways as an "Employee Investment Plan." The 1982 EIP pressed members to loan 10 percent of their wages and benefits for the next year and a half. In theory, the money would be repaid based on sales.

Our caucus rallied solid shop floor opposition. But disguising givebacks as an investment confused enough workers to get the EIP passed with 52 percent of the vote. (Ironically, as a provision of the 1989 Plant Closing Agreement, Local 72 finally forced repayment of the unpaid EIP.)

The time came to take the fight for democracy to the 1983 UAW Convention. Local 72 pledged \$100,000 and spearheaded the campaign to introduce a resolution demanding one member, one vote in the election of International officers.

Another caucus member and I were elected as delegates to attend the convention. Local 72 bombarded local officials and delegates in the U.S. and Canada with a series of letters urging them to pass supportive local resolutions. At the Convention, we waged a



heated floor fight but ultimately lost the voice vote.

The media quoted outgoing International President Doug Fraser: "It took us two months of the hardest work we have ever done before a convention to beat one member, one vote." (*In 2021, UAW members voted to switch to one member, one vote for elections of International officers, following a corruption scandal that landed two of the union's recent presidents in jail. —Eds.*)

In 1984, four members of the *Fighting Times* caucus won top positions on the Local 72 executive board, which was also the bargaining committee. Our first challenge was the 1985 contract. Renault threatened to close the plant and move the models we produced to

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### **Local 72 pledged \$100,000 toward a campaign for one member, one vote.**

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France unless we took punishing concessions. Even with the added expense of shipping cars back across the ocean to the U.S., its production costs would be lower.

We bargained as if our lives depended on it, but the company gave no ground, demanding to bring our contract down to match the Big 3. In the end, the four of us who had always opposed concessions accepted the local president's position: "*A Big 3 job is better than no job at all.*"

We swallowed the bitter pill. A final lesson: Sometimes staying alive is the only option. □

[This article is excerpted from Jon Melrod's book *Fighting Times: Organizing on the Front Lines of the Class War*, forthcoming from PM Press. The book will be on sale at the Labor Notes Conference. Visit [jonathanmelrod.com](http://jonathanmelrod.com) to order.]