

Hard Truth

by St. Louis Post-Dispatch

The president of a major union is, in essence, a politician beholden to his members. Like all politicians, he survives by delivering good news, not bad.

So, it's notable that Ron Gettelfinger of the United Autoworkers Union left the sugar-coating off his annual address at the union convention in Las Vegas.

"The challenges we face aren't the kind that can be ridden out," he warned his membership. "They're structural challenges, and they require new and farsighted solutions."

He is absolutely right.

Gettelfinger represents 600,000 workers, the bulk of them at Ford, GM, DaimlerChrysler and their suppliers. Ford is struggling, and GM faces the real possibility of bankruptcy in coming years. Its major parts supplier, Delphi, is already broke and its slash-and-burn chief executive officer wants deep cuts in UAW members' wages.

To Gettelfinger's credit, he sees the American automakers' fix and recognizes that the UAW is in it with them. In order for workers to have jobs, employers must remain solvent. That led to the painful decision last year to raise the charge for health benefits for active employees and retirees, long before labor contracts were to expire.

"We did an extraordinarily in-depth analysis of the companies' finances and were convinced that action had to be taken now to secure our retirees' health care benefits in the long run," Gettelfinger said.

Through the auto industry's high-profit years, the UAW pushed hard for good pay and benefits. Because of that, auto plants are one of the few remaining places in America where a worker with limited education and skills can earn a middle-class wage with solid benefits, good job security and the prospect of a comfortable retirement.

The UAW renegotiates its contracts with the Big Three next year. Some pieces of that good life may have to be sacrificed in order to avoid losing even more ground if GM or Ford should eventually go broke.

Gettelfinger's willingness to buck the head winds and lead his members on this difficult road - and be frank with them about it - demonstrates just how much the labor movement has had to change its posture. For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, it's a sign of the times.

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