What the Labor Movement Needs to Learn from the UAW-Volkswagen Vote

By Matthew D’Amico

As a political coordinator for a labor union that represents both public and private sector workers throughout New York State, I have seen how labor is on the offensive—yet for working men and women. Our members do difficult work, such as taking care of the disabled and sick, or plowing our roads after a snowstorm. Thanks to their union contracts, fought for over decades, they are treated with more of the dignity and compensation they deserve.

In recent years, however, there have been intensified concerted efforts by big business and elected officials at the national and state levels to have unions not exist at all. In the private sector, many good-paying union jobs in manufacturing have been outsourced to countries where labor is cheap and unions are almost non-existent. And the assault on unions has continued with laws to make states “right to work” (which really means “we can force you to work for less”), and some states have passed or proposed laws taking away collective bargaining rights for public employees, as Wisconsin did. The attempt to destroy unions and all that they have achieved—decent pay, safe working conditions, medical benefits, pensions—exists because every dollar that goes to a union worker takes away from the profits that corporations insist are due to them.

• The Need for Unions, and What Happened in Chattanooga

The need for unions to grow is larger than ever. That is why I, like many others, followed so closely the organizing campaign of the United Auto Workers (UAW) at the Volkswagen (VW) plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee. The importance of this effort was clear, because more foreign-owned auto companies have been opening up plants down South, since labor is cheaper there and most workers aren’t organized. What was unique about this campaign was that Volkswagen and the union both signed a neutrality agreement. Volkswagen, which is used to dealing with workers who have strong union representation in Germany, agreed not to pressure workers against joining the union.

Here in the United States, particularly in the South, trying to organize working people is extremely difficult. Companies break the law by threatening and intimidating workers against joining a union. Untold numbers of men and women have been fired simply for supporting unionization efforts. As someone who did organizing in the South, I saw this kind of intimidation firsthand. I spoke to people working in nursing homes in Georgia, making poverty wages as they cared for the most vulnerable, terrified to talk about unions because they feared being fired. I heard law enforcement tell us we couldn’t stand in front of work sites and talk to people about the union, threatening us with arrest if we didn’t leave.

Many believed that with VW not actively trying to dissuade its workers from joining the union, the UAW would have a fighting chance to organize its first foreign-owned auto plant in the South. As the campaign began it was clear there was a good chance the employees at the VW Chattanooga plant would vote in favor of joining the union, since the overwhelming majority had previously signed cards signaling their support for union representation. Then something shameful and downright evil occurred. Local politicians from the governor to members of the legislature to a U.S. Senator all threatened that if the VW workers voted for the union, the company would not expand in Tennessee and it might also lose further state subsidies. In addition, right wing, anti-union groups put up billboards throughout the area to discourage support for the UAW, insisting that if workers voted for the union what happened to Detroit—bankruptcy—would also happen in Chattanooga. As a result, the UAW lost by a narrow margin. What we saw in Tennessee has gone on all over the country for decades: a ferocious assault on the rights of workers, going to great lengths to cripple or destroy unions.

• The Central Fight Is Described

In an important issue of the journal The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known, Ellen Reiss describes the underlying cause of what led to the UAW loss.

In 1970 Eli Siegel [the founder of Aesthetic Realism] explained that the profit system is such a good economic system, because it will no longer be able to succeed. Though it might struggle on for a while, it would do so with increasing pain to humanity. And that is what has occurred. As production has been taking place in more and more nations, it has become harder and harder for US workers to make a living in big factories or corporate offices. They can do so now only by making the people who actually do the work become poorer and poorer—be paid less and less. That means crushing unions, because it is unions that have enabled working people to earn a dignified wage and be treated with respect.

...As big a fight as any going on in the world—indeed, as big a fight as any in the history of humanity—is the fight now taking place between the profit system and unions.... It is a fight that even most union leaders have not seen clearly. We need to see it clearly, because the fight is really a sheer one. For the profit system to continue, unions must be defeated.

Ms. Reiss, who is the Aesthetic Realism Chairman of Education, continues, describing the chief reason that “the UAW—with all its historic grandeur, kindness, and power,” narrowly lost the VW election.

The furious meddling by government officials came because certain [anti-union] persons do see that if workers get paid well, the profit system won’t be able to go on. If unions prevail, profit will go to those who do the work. And so those protectors of the profit system as such it was, perhaps the union really should be destroyed.

(There’s VW itself. One can question how much it’s really for unions. You don’t set up a plant in a right-to-exploit state like Tennessee because you want a union.)

The story is not over in Chattanooga or the rest of the South, where many working people are demanding justice for themselves and their communities. In fact there is a UAW organizing campaign going on at the Nissan plant in Oxford, Mississippi. And it is clear that workers are ready to fight for their right to be in a union. For example, Chip Wells, an 11-year veteran working there, said, “People think that [the Volkswagen vote] derailed us, but we think it made us stronger....Here labor rights are civil rights, it’s really human rights.” (Labor South blog Feb. 28th by Joseph B. Atkins)

Millions of Americans who are suffering—unemployed, struggling to make ends meet, worried about their future—are depending on a strong and vibrant labor movement. So now is the time for union officials, activists, and rank and file members to be clear about what we are fighting for, and fighting against. I’ve seen firsthand that Aesthetic Realism is the knowledge that makes for that much needed understanding and the hope of people, including every member of a union. Ellen Reiss writes:

And if unions and the economic justice they represent succeed, the profit way will be done in, finished, kaput. When that happens it will be (as the idiom goes) good riddance to bad rubbish. There will be a way of economics different from any that has been. It will be based, neither on profit for a few nor on “collectivism,” but on an honest answer to the question Eli Siegel said was the most important for humanity: “What does a person deserve by being a person?”

Contempt at root

Regarding the stabbings at Franklin Regional High School in Murrysville, PA last month, appallingly, a shocked nation asks: How can this be happening—again—in American schools, places where every child should be safe and secure? As parents, our hearts go out to the children who were hurt, to their families and to the other students at the school who were so profoundly affected by this tragedy. We were moved, too, reading about the courageous actions of Sam King, the assistant principal, and many students. As educators, politicians and citizens all cry out for an answer to the question “When will this end?” we are impelled to say that these atrocities were caused by and against a person.

Eli Siegel, founder of the educational philosophy Aesthetic Realism, explained the cause of all human cruelties, including what compels a 16-year-old student to want to hurt so many of his classmates. It is contempt, “the addition to self of contempt for another,” and contempt for a person is the cause of what was inflicted on 21 students in Murrysville on an early spring morning.

School shootings and other forms of contempt are studied, understood, and criticized in schools and everywhere across America, and people are able to see that their true importance comes from seeing the feelings of other human beings to be as deep and real as their own.

LAUREN and BRUCE BLAUSTEIN

New York, NY.
Teaching with movies:
Can contempt be animated?

By Ken Kimmelman

Can contempt be animated? Yes it can! Film animation artists since 1909, when Gertie the Dinosaur defiantly turned her back to the audience, have been interested in animating the contempt people have for the world. And when animation is successful, it gives form to contempt as a means of opposing it.

I began to learn this in my study of the philosophy Aesthetic Realism, founded by the American poet and critic Eli Siegel. He showed me the power of contempt, and how contempt is something I disliked myself as adding to me—other green brushstrokes. I’ve asked the children, “Do you think the green brushstroke is smart, cool? “No!” they’ve shouted back, “he was mean and stupid!” I’ve also asked, “Do you have anything like the green brushstroke in you? Can you think you’re bigger by making something else smaller? When you say “noo!” to something, do you feel like a big shot? “Yes,” a boy answered. “What do you think of yourself?” He said, “I feel bad.” I asked, “What kind of world would it be if it was made of only green brushstrokes?” They yell, “Bo-o-or-ing!” “Is the world more beautiful and exciting having many different colors and shapes?” “Yes!” they answer. “And do the colors and shapes add to each other? And is that how you want to see other people—as adding to you?” “Yes!” they shout out.

The purpose of animation is to bring objects to life, to give them anima—to have people feel the charm, the wonder of reality. That contempt can be animated, criticized, and changed into useful form—the meaning of this for the world and every person’s life is truly great!

KEN KIMMELMAN is an award-winning filmmaker and consultant on the faculty of the Aesthetic Realism Foundation in New York City where he teaches the class “If It Moves It Can Move You”: Opposites in the Cinema.

Does the Keystone Arch Meet a Hope of Ours?
or, Strength and Grace Can Be One!

By Donita Ellison

I taught Art History at LaGuardia High School in Manhattan for many years, using the Aesthetic Realism Teaching Method, based on the educational philosophy founded by Eli Siegel. I’ve seen this method work in my classroom with thousands of students. For a teacher to know what I’m fortunate to have learned—that the purpose of education and life is to make the world on an honest basis—is an absolute necessity! Aesthetic Realism also explains the biggest interference with learning: the desire to have contempt, to get an “addition to self through the lessening of something else.”

In teaching the unit on the art of ancient Rome, my class studied how the keystone arch was central to its great architectural structures. There is the Pont du Gard, a powerfully-built stone arches, built in the 1st century BC in Nîmes, France. What makes this structure beautiful is in this principle stated by Eli Siegel: “All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.”

This aqueduct with its repeating curves and strong vertical supports, carried 180 gallons of water per day over a distance of 30 miles for each city resident, making possible the fountains and public water works. “Clearly this is powerful, but what does it have something else?” I asked. “Is it also ever so graceful, with those curves?” I’ve seen that students—including the toughest young men—long to be both strong and graceful, or gentle, and suffer because they feel they can’t be both. They think if they have gentleness they’ll be weak and people will take advantage of them. My class began to see that this aqueduct does something they were hoping to do: puts opposites together.

They wanted to know how the aqueduct worked, and we learned that the power of gravity is what made the water flow. Built on an exquisitely calculated decline, from its source high in the mountains, the water flowed downward to the city fountains. Rafael was amazed to learn that this aqueduct was designed to withstand the strength of flooding river currents and has remained standing for 2000 years even as more modern bridges in the area have washed out in heavy flooding! “Wow, that’s strong!” he said. “What did this strength come from?” I asked. The strength actually depends on that curved, graceful thing—the arch. As we read from our textbook, Helen Gardner’s Art through the Ages, this description of the Pont du Gard, there was a sense of awe: “Each large arch spans some 82 feet and is constructed ofuncemented blocks weighing up to two tons each.”

The class saw the amazing relation of solidity and lightness in this structure. Vocabulary words for the lesson were keystone and voussoir. The voussoirs, I explained, are the wedge-shaped stone fitted around the sides of the arch, and the Keystone is the topmost voussoir. The Keystone, the last stone placed at the highest point in the arch, locks all the other stones or voussoirs into place. The downward pressure it exerts gives the arch its strength. The other voussoirs, in turn, send a counter pressure upward on both sides, holding the keystone in place. The strength of an arch, we learned, depends on something that has amazing delicacy— the precision with which the voussoirs are fitted together—and all done without any cement!

The class was thrilled to see that the keystone—the thing upon which all that power depends—seems to be the lightest, even the most vulnerable thing, with nothing but space underneath it! George, who rarely showed any emotion, was really cool,” he said.

In this arch, massiveness is the same as lightness; strength is the same as delicacy or grace. Seeing these opposites as one in a structure that has joined earth, sky, and water for thousands of years, my students had more hope for themselves.

Bio: Donita Ellison is a sculptor, printmaker and an Associate of the Aesthetic Realism Foundation in NYC. She has been a guest lecturer at The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and El Museo del Arte de Puerto Rico, and teaches staff development workshops.

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