

## 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 important union representation is 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 their due.

### ■ 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 people, 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 constantly 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 had reached the point at which it was no longer 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 companies to haul in big profits for stockholders. 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, profits will go to those who earn them—the workers—instead of persons who don't do the work. And so those protectors of the profit way will fight against unions with every vicious weapon and sleazy trick they can. The UAW thought it had an amicable agreement with VW; it didn't see that it was fighting the profit system as such, and so it was, perhaps, somewhat blindsided. (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, actually 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 meets the hopes 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?"

## Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

APRIL 14, 2014

ONE OF AMERICA'S GREAT NEWSPAPERS

PITTSBURGH, PA

### Contempt at root

Regarding the stabbings at Franklin Regional High School in Murrysville, once more, agonizingly, 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 CAN end!

Eli Siegel, founder of the educational philosophy Aesthetic Realism, explained the cause of all human cruelties, including what impels a 16-year-old student to want to hurt so many of his classmates. It is contempt, "the addition to self through the lessening of something else." It is in each of us—for example, in a group of children

making fun of the way another child dresses. But this everyday contempt, taken far enough, is the cause of what was inflicted on 21 students in Murrysville on an early spring morning.

School tragedies will end when contempt is 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 audiences, 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 that I wanted to give artistic form to something I disliked myself for very much—how I could mock and make fun. That form is in this great Aesthetic Realism principle: “All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.”

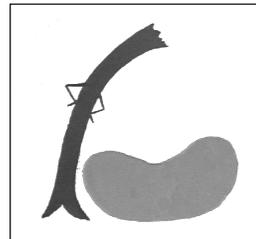
With one part of me I wanted to make films that had beauty, but with the other, I thought the more ridiculous and silly I could make things look, the more profound I'd be. This was definitely contempt, the thing that takes the possibly beautiful and makes it ugly; and also exploits the ugly for the glory of oneself. But the purpose of art, which Aesthetic Realism shows corresponds to our deepest desire, takes the pretenses, hypocrisies and cruelties and shows they can be used in behalf of beauty, good sense, and like of the world.

That was my purpose in 1989, when the United Nations commissioned me to make a film for children against prejudice, with the proviso there be no spoken language because it was going to be shown all over the world, and no colors that would imply a particular race of people.

I came to the idea of an artist's canvas being painted with different colors and shapes as the characters who, instead of speaking to each other, express themselves through motions, sounds, and music. *Brushstrokes* is one of the films I show to children in the presentations I give, titled “Prejudice Changes to Kindness: Aesthetic Realism Shows How!” in schools and libraries. A large value of the film is, through humor, it gives form to, makes outward, the ugliness

and hurtfulness of the contempt, which, I learned, is the cause of prejudice, as it also shows the ridiculousness of it.

It moves me every time to see how much children are interested in ethics. When they see contempt acted out on a big screen, they show how much they dislike it and want to be against it. The main character, the prejudiced green brushstroke, sees anything that is different—a color, a shape, even sounds—as against him, to be disdained and dismissed. And what he cares for are things that are like him—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 'pooh!' 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 eagerly 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!

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## ARTBEAT

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ART EDUCATORS OF NEW JERSEY

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

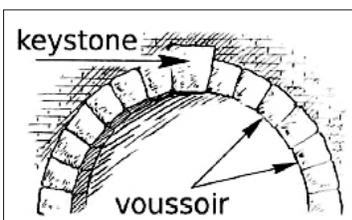
By Donita Ellison

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 itself is to like 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 aqueduct consisting of a series of graceful keystone 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 100 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 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: it 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 of uncemented 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 *vousoir*. The vousoirs, I explained, are the wedge-shaped stones fitted around the sides of the arch, and the keystone is the topmost vousoir. The keystone, the last stone placed at the highest point in the arch, locks all the other stones or vousoirs into place. The downward pressure it exerts gives the arch its strength. The other vousoirs, in turn, send a counter pressure upwards 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 vousoirs 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 excited, “That's 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 at 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.*