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GROWING MOVEMENT TO KEEP GM-VAN NUYS OPEN

by William Segala

"Does a company that is making not just millions, but billions in profits, have a right to close down a plant, ruin 5000 families, to make even greater profits somewhere else?" Bishop Juan Arzube of the Los Angeles Catholic Archdiocese posed this question at a recent meeting of 400 auto workers and supporters. He was addressing a coalition which has come together to stop General Motors from closing its assembly plant at Van Nuys, California.

This article will discuss the reasons people are concerned the plant may close and how Van Nuys workers have built a movement to keep it open.

GM Strategy—GM executives say they plan to keep the Van Nuys plant open "for the time being." But massive layoffs and a rapid series of plant closings have hit California auto workers hard, cutting their numbers from 20,000 to 6,000 in just four years. The workers at GM-Van Nuys fear their jobs may be next on the chopping block.

They have good reason to be concerned. Over a year ago, Van Nuys workers began analyzing major trends in the auto industry. They concluded that in a bid to meet Japanese competition and cut inventory costs, the Big Three auto manufacturers are attempting to relocate their large car assembly operations close to parts production facilities in the Midwest.

But U.S. auto makers worry that even these changes may not be enough to dig the auto industry out of its present difficulties. Taking the attitude that "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em," in the small car market, the Big Three are shifting capital to Japan. Chrysler owns 15% of Mitsubishi, Ford now has 25% of Mazda, and GM recently upped its share of Isuzu from 17 to 40%.

The workers discovered that GM is making large profits from the hot-selling Camaros and Firebirds it produces at their plant. In the first nine months of 1983, GM profits stood at a staggering \$2.4 billion. But the world's largest automaker wants to reap even larger profits by relocating its production facilities elsewhere.

Last October, management made an announcement which confirmed the suspicions of many workers. GM told them that it might soon close the Van Nuys plant, despite its success in extracting \$3 billion in concessions during recent national contract negotiations.

Labor-Community Coalition—UAW Local 645 responded immediately by initiating the Campaign to Keep GM-Van Nuys Open. Like many plant closings around the country, GM's threat angered many workers, who saw it as an attempt to pit them against workers abroad and elsewhere in the U.S.

But the Campaign has succeeded in doing something that few other plant closing movements have done on so large a scale: it has built a broad labor-community coalition to keep the plant open. Local 645 President Peter Z. Beltran describes the philosophy of the Campaign as follows: "It's time that General Motors begins to think about their social responsibility to their workers and the communities that have supported GM products all these years."

Through demonstrations, media coverage and broad outreach, the Van Nuys workers have educated thousands of people in the Los Angeles area about what a shutdown would mean to them. With a payroll of \$142 million, for example, the Van Nuys plant has a direct and indirect impact on a great many jobs throughout the Los Angeles area. The union estimates that every job lost to GM-Van Nuys would take two more local jobs with it.

The Campaign has enjoyed particularly strong support from nearby Chicano and other Latino communities. For these communities in particular, a Van Nuys shutdown would effectively close off an important avenue for political and economic advancement. The auto industry has been an important source of relatively high-paying jobs for minority workers, who have experienced considerable difficulty



obtaining well-paid positions outside basic industry. The auto industry has also been an arena in which minority workers have won union leadership positions, at least at the local level.

At GM-Van Nuys, over half the workers are Latino, as is the union president. A Van Nuys shutdown would close the last remaining auto plant in California, continuing a trend which has been eliminating minority workers from the auto industry. Campaign coordinator Eric Mann put it this way: "GM can say it doesn't discriminate against Chicanos and that it just happened to close all the plants in the Southwest. GM says it's merely an objective business decision, but we are saying it's objectively discriminatory." Latino workers have spearheaded a major drive to inform and educate their communities about the potential impact of a shutdown on those communities.

Today, the Van Nuys workers enjoy the support of a broad range of groups and individuals, including UFW president Cesar Chavez, California Assemblywoman Maxine Waters, Bishop Arzube of the Catholic Archdiocese, Rev. Frank Higgins of the Baptist Ministers Conference, the Los Angeles Coalition Against Plant Shutdowns, Professors Rudy Acuna and Raul Ruiz of the Chicano Studies Department at California State University at Northridge, president Charlie Brown of IAM Lodge 727, and Edward Asner of the Screen Actors Guild.

A GM Boycott?--But even with all this support, can Van Nuys workers and their supporters really stop GM from closing the plant? More and more people think they can. Los Angeles is GM's largest market in the country, with 126,000 sales in 1982. Campaign activists feel that a local boycott of GM products would force the company to consider the social costs of a shutdown. Thus the basic strategy in keeping the plant open involves consumer pressure, a strategy made possible by the wide support the Van Nuys workers have gained in the surrounding communities. Recent articles in the *Los Angeles Times* and *Business Week* have brought the issue to the attention of many others as well.

On October 22, a coalition of over 100 union presidents, influential clergy, politicians, and black, Chicano and Latino community groups gathered to demand a meeting with GM Chairman Roger Smith to discuss the future of the plant. In the context of increasingly widespread opposition to a Van Nuys shutdown, Smith helped set up a meeting between GM President F. James McDonald and coalition representatives in late January. As the *Labor Center Reporter* goes to press, the outcome of this meeting is uncertain, but the very fact that it is taking place testifies to the growing strength of the movement to keep GM-Van Nuys open.

Whatever the future may bring, Van Nuys workers and their union have succeeded in putting GM on the defensive at a time when much of the labor movement is groping for answers. Unions and management alike will be closely watching developments at GM-Van Nuys for some time to come.

-- William Segal

NOTE: A 34-minute videotape based on the October 22 Labor/Community Meeting to Keep GM-Van Nuys Open is available from Eric Mann, c/o UAW Local 645, 7915 Van Nuys Boulevard, Van Nuys, California 91402. The videotape can also be obtained from the Plant Closings Project, 433 Jefferson St., Oakland, California 94607.

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