

Oral Histories

The American Auto Worker Project

Conducted by Edward Savelle  
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Part of an independent study of the  
UAW and rank and file auto workers  
from the 1960s through 2012

May and June, 2012

Project: The American Auto Worker  
Researcher: Edward Savela  
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*On June 21, 2012, Edward Savela met with Karl Burnett at UAW Local 22's union hall. Mr. Burnett, a retired General Motors/UAW auto worker, is today a union activist as well as a Democratic Party activist in Michigan. The Local had just concluded its monthly retiree meeting and Karl was one of the speakers.*

**KB** I was just recently invited by some old friends in organized labor to participate in the Labor Legacy Monument Historical Society. The monument itself to which that's dedicated is located downtown here in Detroit, right between Jefferson Avenue and Heart Plaza. While working, I also volunteered to work at the Sheriff's office. I'm a Captain at the Sheriff's office Reserve Division. And I took a Sergeant with me and was showing off the Labor Monument to him and as we were going through he was impressed with everything that was there, but he was unimpressed with one other thing. Apparently, it's deteriorating some in many ways, to vandalism and sports like skate boarding. However, the way it's designed is in an arc that at the top it's not completely joined, signifying by the architect and the people who had the duty of designing it, that the work is never done. Now there's the names of all the contributors who donated as I did, between my father, my grandfather, my brother, myself are names all described on the monument on a plaque wall. Then there are euphemisms, incredible quotes, and landmark comments made by labor leaders over all the decades that are engraved and placed all about that monument section. The monument was deeded over to the City of Detroit as a gift to the Detroit 300 Committee, which was celebrating their 300<sup>th</sup> year of Detroit's existence. Since then Detroit's been in trouble and there's been some deterioration due to skateboarders, recreationist, and theft, steeling light bulbs and lenses and things. Some are just damaged. The reason I was invited to join in on the committee was because I'd called attention to that by calling some of the friends that I know, Dave Osilla, Mike Curren and some other friends of mine, Dave Vibors who are also on the Historical Society Committee. In bringing that to their attention, they invited me to the last two of their meetings. At which time of course, with my cell phone, I took pictures of this deterioration and damage and it became a subject of what I think will probably end up asking the City of Detroit to deed the monument back to the Historical Society and maybe then do some creative joint fundraising between concerned sources and start developing a continuous revenue that will support the main instant repair of the monument from here on out. That's the goal that we are striving for now. I'm third of four generations of my family that have worked in the American auto industry. I have seen a lot of changes. When I first joined there were still carts being towed behind tractors in the plant that were gas powered and looked like they had been around since 1892. Techniques and methods to build automobiles that have been around for decades and with all the peer pressure and the critique that the domestic American auto industry has gotten, I've watched also the innovation, the changes; in the form of changes the union contracts, with uncompetitive provisions that were previously negotiated in contracts that were proven to be uncompetitive and in need of change to make better products, including statistical quality analysis and a lot of other things. I actually participated in the Engineering Design Program for the North Star and Aurora engines. In doing so, I put the average, everyday, blue collar, UAW members input in perspective on that engine and I actually drew the first sketch of the main component that I think enabled them to design a few pieces that were contained in the engine and successfully designed that engine so it could turn 7,000 rpm right of the

assembly line. A lot of people don't even know the North Star or an Aurora V-8 or even a V-6 can do that.

**ES** *Were you an Engineer?*

**KB** No, but I participated in the engineering program. As a child I strived to become an automotive styling engineer. I actually drew a picture of the 1961 Buick's front fender probably three or four or five years before it came out.

**ES** *Really?*

**KB** Yes, I wish I still had that drawing, so I could prove it. But I remember doing it.

**ES** *You don't seem old enough for that.*

**KB** I will draw my first social security check this month. I turn 62 in May.

**ES** *Happy Birthday*

**KB** I've been to the Detroit Institute of Arts. I've seen the mural painted by Diego on the wall. I have to testify that based on my own experience, I know what it was like to be an autoworker where if you drilled holes for rivets to install a windshield on a model A Ford. If you broke your drill, you had to go to the parts crypt and you had to buy a new drill yourself out of your pocket. There were places where people were exposed to terrible chemical dangers that were never regulated. People exposed to toxics and ergonomically incorrectly designed jobs. People like Harvey Carpuick, he worked at the Cadillac sheet metal plant four, which used to be the old Hudson plant on Conner Avenue. He lived across the street from me and after he retired from bending over, picking up sheet metal and placing it in the stamping presses for many years. His back was curved so badly through work related injury that he walked bent over in the shape of a C until the end of his life.

**ES** *It's tough work.*

**KB** It's always been hard work. In fact, it was work that a lot of people would say, "I'm never going to go in there, and I'm never going to do that boring repetitious stuff." By the time it was over I did minus my military service time, I did 38.7 years in there myself. And if you say today that I belie my own age it was because I was very careful and watched what I did. But a lot of it can be attributed to the changes that really started to take place in the early 1980's. Quality work life. Human relations, union or employee management relationships. Working together, striving to health and safety, for working in teams for solving problems. I used to be an instructor in solving problems, making decisions and making plans. As well as working in teams, I was certified in that. And I taught classes. There were just a number of things through in and throughout the area I was always a full-time employee working on the floor. I was always a union officer. At times when I was a union officer, my office was right around the corner, behind the finance office, on the other hall.

**ES** *Here at Local 22?*

**KB** I did the work on my own time. A lot of the time. As recording Secretary, as Trustee I watched the treasury and things like that. But the same time they were never full-time jobs and I always worked in the facility only leaving to do these special assignments at times. That was a good thing because it always kept me in touch with what was going on. I didn't get away from it, I didn't forget where I came from. I think I benefited from that, for that reason. There were a lot of people who when they were elected in that position who got away from the work. They also kind of got away from their roots, and that was not a good thing. However, for about twelve, fifteen, sixteen years, that was working pretty well. Somewhere down the line the people that tried to torpedo the new deal, the people who created the John Birch Society back in the 1960's, who's changed their name at least twice since then, A, to the religious right, and B, to the tea party. People working against middle-class American and having a decent standard living for people who work for a living, having been working against this thing all this time. And they think really, by



the mid 1990s, there was so much pressure that had come on from Washington DC, Wall Street from the Chambers of Commerce that de-unionizing America and taking this back was their ultimate goal. From about 1994, 1995 through about 1999 or 2000, an awful lot had been accomplished in union management relations in the time periods between late 1970s to mid 1990s have basically been reversed and been changed again.

**ES** *So you think the higher point in the quality for the middle class, American autoworker whose more late 1970s to mid 1990s?*

**KB** Yes, and unfortunately labor and those workers themselves made a mistake. They failed to toot their own horn. There are still a lot of people out there that when they think of the automotive domestic industry in America, they never called attention to all the changes, the concessions, the different way of looking at it and the different way of doing things that they had accomplished. Many of them to some extent reluctantly, but still made it. They never talked about it and it was never amplified by the “liberal media,” which is an oxymoron. I told the Northville Record while a candidate for public office once: “Yeah, I think that’s too wide a paint brush to be painting people up with,” and they said “Why’s that?” So I said if you want to ask me about the liberalism in journalism, I think it begins somewhere right about the beginning of the first amendment and that it ends somewhere just before the beginning of the second amendment. However, conservative media talking heads on the radio, talking faces on the TV, pictures in magazines like Newsweek and The Wall Street Journal, they point to the media and journalism like its some massive communistic media liberal organization that needs to be taken out and shot. Well no. I think the liberalism in journalism is contained wholly within the First Amendment of Constitution of the United States of America and goes no further. And again, the workers, the unions, the Democratic Party—the people who are a part of that whole, at one time, huge infrastructure—failed to take advantage of the media in ways that they where they could promote, even something as trivial as writing articles from our readers. Working people in America, failed to benefit, even partially, to all the things they have been and have done to change the American automotive industry so that people could understand how much change really actually occurred.

**ES** *Here we have a room of a lot of people that are very strong views to our way of thinking, but there also working people who don’t have a lot of money, so we have to put the feet on the street and knock on the doors, whereas on the other side people can buy that kind, of letters to the editor, writing about the accomplishments. That’s hard to do when you are working 12-hour shifts.*

**KB** Today there are fewer boots on the ground, fewer knuckles on the doorframes, fewer voices being heard in the halls, because I think while working America has failed to take advantage of technologies and media even though they are doing a little bit. I don’t tweet, but I am on face book, and I am on the Internet. You could say that if I hadn’t benefited myself of an experience that I had where, I was recommended by Union Steward to contact a person in our region headquarters to help me with a problem, which initially I thought, “gee I don’t know if I’ll do that or not,” but I went ahead and made the phone call. I’m glad today that I did. When I saw the results of having made that call, requested assistance and received it, it inspired me to look deeper and deeper into my union and how I could become a better activist. Had it not been for that, and I already had about eight or nine years seniority by that time, I could have been another one of those people I think you talked to Cass about. There are people who came into the auto industry, became members of the UAW, but didn’t necessary become “unionist.” We have some people who probably succeeded in working an entire career and earning a retirement and pension in the UAW at Cadillac Motor Car, GM Power Train, or Detroit Hamtramck Assembly without ever attending a union meeting or union function.

**ES** *So they didn’t really give back as much maybe as they benefited from?*

**KB** And I attribute that to the fact that the union seemed to have been completely self-contained and refusing in many ways to change themselves. They kept talking the talk and walking the walk the same way they did in back in the 1930s and 1940s. The younger people coming into the auto industry in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s didn't embrace that. At the same time all they ever saw was each time a contractor was negotiated there was little or no threat of a strike, because Wall Street and the American automotive industry was only interested in always getting the contract and to keep making money. They knew the time would come when they wouldn't be able to afford this stuff and they would have to back it up as they are doing today. If you got hired in 1960-1980, all you ever saw was the constantly growing, growing upswing, better contracts, more wages, more benefits, more time off work, a better life. And I think, as I think many do, an assumption if it was there when they came in, that it always was there, and that it will always be there. Therefore, "they don't need my participation; they don't need me to be an activist."

**ES** *Sort of a bubble burst.*

**KB** The apathy that we have today, a bubble bursting, sure. That's what I think it came to. Organized labors biggest problem today is finding ways of taking union members and turning them into unionists.

**ES** *Another interview I did brought up the two-tiered system. I get mixed messages on when it came in, but playing the retirees against the new guys who come in with a lower wage scale and no retirement. The retirees don't have the same votes as these guys do. Is there some of that you would foresee a problem?*

**KB** Yes, let me call you attention to something. When the Canadian united workers and the American autoworkers. There was a time when negotiations would go on between the UAW and GM, Ford, Chrysler and others. I think the UAW was making mistakes at that time which President White in Canada also felt very strongly about it. So strongly that he seceded from the UAW and created the Canadian UAW. Whereby the contracts could be settled in the United States, resulting in concessions being made by Canadian autoworkers that American UAW members didn't have to take. That resulted in the secession of the Canadian autoworkers from the UAW. In that same way it has always been perceived that one of the best reinforcements to solidarity is taking money off the table. If you and I are working side by side and women are working are working with us and other members with lesser or greater seniority, outside of which department you work in or what job classification you may have earned or transferred into, your wages are relatively the same. That reinforces solidarity. The UAW and all the unions resisted any changes for that for a really long, long time. I think it was in 1987 or 1990 was when the first concession on wages were actually negotiated whereby a new hire would come into work and for the first three years, would work at a lesser wage. I think it was something like 60 or 75%. I don't know right now, I'd have to go back and check those books. However, later on in either 1997 or 2000 or 2003, sometime around then, another contract was negotiated that created provisions for people to be hired as entry level employees, paid a rate of about half of what current employees were being paid, without any chance of having an increase, no matter how long they work.

**ES** *In Canada?*

**KB** No here in the United States at the UAW.

**ES** *Affecting all the Big Three?*

**KB** No, strategically by the time that started happening, there were so many of the previous generation that had been working had actually left out or became apathetic to that, that it wasn't such a shocking culture change as it would have been if they tried that in 1950, 1960, or 1970. But nonetheless, it didn't happen. I made a prediction in 2007 and I told people then, "if you think they've been off sharing work in the past it's because they found ways to advantage themselves in terms of profit. The economic advantage of



outsourcing work has always been there. With the 2007 agreement and these entry-level employees being hired at \$14.00 an hour, with no benefits for years. Even when they do earn benefits, one of them they would never earn was a pension. They'd be given the opportunity to get a 401K and get going according to Wall Street.

**ES** *Health and Welfare.*

**KB** The 401K's have always been there, it's not like they just added that on. If you wanted to earn a retirement as a union member in a work place and then additionally, enhance your retirement by purchasing accounts in 401K's, etc. You could do it all along anyway. All they did was eliminate the pension.

**ES** *Define benefit versus define contribution.*

**KB** The difference is in defined benefits means you get the same amount. Define contribution means they can change the amount. I was talking to some people about this privatizing social security. I said, "If Wall Street has a bad quota, would you want to see your retirement check decreased?" That was the first time I ever got those conservatives from Detroit, Michigan to shut up. They said, "no."

**ES** *Somebody mentioned the Pension Benefit Guarantee Corporation. Which is an extremely important piece of the legislation. I think it's still out there and I think it guarantees these pensions to these people. Correct?*

**KB** To an extent that's correct. But it doesn't protect it to 100%. It can be decrease to as much as 50-65% of what you would get if you had your defined benefit pension upon retirement. The PBGC doesn't have all the money that GM has and they have a different benefit credit per years dollar structure than does your pension plan when you work at a union, say General Motors or Ford or Chrysler. Had President Obama, not come to the aid of General Motors and Chrysler Corporation at the time that he did, with the bridge loans. A loan is a loan and they have been paying it back. Taxpayers subsidized it initially but they're paying back and they are still paying it back.

**ES** *Willard tried to take a little credit for that, but no one would let him.*

**KB** If the President and his administration hadn't come to the aid of the domestic auto industry at the time he did, my pension check could've been reduced had it been turned over to the PBGC. I would not have liked that. I would not be able to live in my home. I would not be able to afford my own retirement. That would have been tragic. The way it affected active workers is to reduce wages, less benefits, less safety working rules, less opportunities to better yourself and no chance of earning a pension. The things that are being done to the next generation of people working in America are tragic. It's not going to be good. Now, on the political side, if you noticed in the Presidential Primaries on the Republican side for months and months and months, all we heard out of Mitt Romney and Santorum and all these other guys, as many as nine candidates, everyone of them was beating down the ramparts with "No, I'm the most conservative candidate, no I'm the most conservative candidate." There was no such thing as being too far to the right. Everybody was chasing Santorum and Ron Paul. I guess Ron Paul is still in the race? If you call that being in the race. Now that the primary is over and with the convention coming soon, Romney, a cinch, he's going to be the nominated candidate on the Republican side. What's he doing out there now? He's taking credit, he's moved himself way over from conservative to middle of the road guy, who, "Aint I just a great guy, I'm smiling in your face and I'm telling you I like Michigan and I like trees, and I like lakes, and I like people who work for a living, and I think people ought to have this and ought to have that." That's all you hear out of that guy today. These chameleons don't deserve the powder it would take to put them in haze.

**ES** *What do you think of all the money under Citizens United in these races.*

**KB** In that Supreme Court, justice decision? I think it's an abomination in the form of trying to treat corporations as if they can get up and walk to the polls and cast a vote. It's

ridiculous. It's not that the campaign finance laws didn't already need reforming, that they weren't bad enough already. With that they just got worse. The Chamber of Commerce has been funneling money offshore through other channels and then back into the country to fund candidate to pay for these outrageous sound bites and commercials we see all over the place. There is literally no restriction on it anymore. It's a financial free-for-all. There is Move to Amend out there working on the Constitution Amendment to A, reverse that decision; and B, make an additional change to the Constitution to make it where they can't do that again. Our US Supreme Courts and our State Supreme Courts are basically, in my opinion, the most powerful people we have in the nation. At States level they are elected and at the Federal level they are appointed.

**ES** *It's worse in Alabama than it is here, if you can imagine that. I was a big supported of recall Scott Walker, I couldn't believe that he was defeated 7-1 on the money thing.*

**KB** Boy am I glad we got a chance to talk about recalls here Ed. Recalls are wrong. Recalls are a distraction from the issues. Recalls are not for people who say, oops, wrong person got elected. I hate this person. I don't like what he's done so I am going to try to yank this person out of office. I'm a unionist. I used to be the guy here in the local union and Rhonda used to do it too here. I was overwhelmed with the sense of the level of responsibility I would have. Being the guy at the local union, who was largely responsible for making the all the UAW Constitutional interpretation for the local union. [Burnett is briefly interrupted for some union business] Recalls are for elected officials who have conducted a violation of law, demonstrated malfeasance that can be proven in court, or basically just become psychologically incapable of doing the job. That's the criteria. It isn't because the wrong guy got elected.

**ES** *Change the subject a little bit and go back to the 1980's and how some of the rank and file of the so-called Reagan Democrats, the emergence of that?*

**KB** We had a former local union official who at the time he retired he was the VP of the local union here, his name was Jesse Jamesworth. I was in Washington at the Committee Action Program Conference one year when he was standing there with me in the hotel lobby, and he lamented away, "Karl I think we've made a mistake." I said, "Jesse what would that mistake have been, because I can't figure out which one you are talking about?" He said, "the one I'm talking about is the one where we've done too good of job pandering for our own self benefit to remember and encourage them to vote split ticket. To get elected all of our committeemen started saying, "hey, don't pay attention to that cat Sherman, they don't know what they are talking about. These Republicans aren't that bad. Rush Limbaugh is a good guy." Instead of what they said on the title of that book, "he's a big fat idiot." Jesse was lamenting away and he was sharing with me, "Yeah I remember when we did it, how we did it, and I remember how we did too good of a job." That along with saying when people came into the work force in the 1960s, the 70s, the 80s, they said, "hmmm." I know when I first hired in the 1970 it was \$3.52 an hour. When I retired it was \$30 an hour. Ten times that much. There were people who came in the work force upon their arrival and saying "it's here now and it will be here forever." All this split ticketing voting was a phenomenon that existed amongst all of the other. You could write a book on this stuff about the industry, what it did and how it came about today. I remember when I was in engineering with the North Star Aurora and Prema V-6, a model of an engine pattern came after the Prema V-8 when a guy named Ed McDonald from the Power Train Staff called me into his cubicle, set me down and gave me a talk about the importance of taking care of the investors. I had been talking to him about, how many people we need to do the job, how many to ensource work, be vertically integrated, not horizontally integrated, or "disintegrated." These are industrial terms to describe an organization when vertically integrated they do a lot of stuff under one room, when horizontally disintegrated they farm out a lot of work. In fact, everything they can.



When the wages were hirer, Wall Street was saying, "settle those contracts, keep the plants running, and we are going to bring competition in from other countries, which they did. Ever see the movie Tucker?"

**ES** *No*

**KB** Jeff Bridges played Tucker, who was a guy who tried to start a car company in the late 1940s in America. And he was hit with judges, actuaries, industrial competition, government and everything they could hit them with, until basically put out of business. He managed 50 vehicles and then was put out of business.

**ES** *I've heard of Carl Tucker.*

**KB** The auto industry did not want him on the playing field and they did everything they could to destroy this guy. That's what the movie is about demonstrating how they kept doing everything they could to destroy this guy. Some of them went out of business, cause they didn't know how to handle business. There was at one time, 1000 different automotive makers in America. There were names like, Hupmobile, Pontiac, "the Oakland." Oldsmobile later after he sold it to GM was referred to as REO. Now in this new century I'm living in Livonia driving down seven mile road towards Livonia Mall, slowing to stop for a traffic light and look over and see a vehicle that's stopped just about me. I look at the back of the automobile and it says, "KIA." It isn't bad enough that we have Hyundai, Toyota, Suzuki, all these joint ventures that they did. Where do you think the S-10 Pickup came from?

**ES** *Chevrolet?*

**KB** Negative. Isuzu. Love truck. Where you think the Tracker came from? Joint venture Suzuki. Never made in America, always in Canada. The GO Storm? The GO Metro? Isuzu? The joint venture of new United Motors Manufacturer of California.

**ES** *These were attempts of U.S. automakers to quickly get into a smaller car market?*

**KB** Absolutely. What do you think Mazda Trivia is today? It's another joint venture with Ford Motor Company and they also make the Ford version, which is called the Escape. Same vehicle, different badge. This stuff is going on everywhere. With all this, I see this KIA at the intersection and I'm remembering Tucker. Boy have the times changed. In 1948 they assassinated Tucker, today these car companies are going about with these "Global Business Partners" they call them today and actually encouraging people to bring manufacturing of other vehicles into the country now. What has changed? Wall Street has been financing this whole operation. U.S. Chamber of Commerce and all of its state subsidiaries and local subsidiaries including the Livonia Chamber of Commerce in Michigan, they are all in this together. The onslaught that's going on today is not about hating teachers, not about hating state workers, not about hating firefighters or law enforcement people. But if you stop and think about it, every one of those occupations are traditional and historically unionized.

**ES** *So it's a war against collective bargaining?*

**KB** It's a war against unionism, it's a war against organized labor and it always has been. It's never been about anything else. At a time when they were all fat, dumb and happy and they weren't all that well organized, before the John Birch Society, they assassinated Tucker basically, economically, and business wise. Today, with their Global Business Partners they are actually bringing these people in, because the only way you can get rid of a union, as I've said in the years, is one job at a time. When you take the work away, you take the union away.

**ES** *And they've found creative ways of doing that.*

**KB** Incredibly creative.

**ES** *I've come to be fond of Walter P. Ruther the more I study him.*

**KB** If I'd had known him, I'm sure he would've been a friend.

**ES** *Ahead of his time. I'm doing some research out there. Going up to Black Lake this plane*



*crash with him and his wife, May. Later someone wrote a book called "The Most Dangerous Man In Detroit" about him. He was very powerful and very progressive. He was a guy who was much higher up the food chain than you and I, but would share the same thoughts. Any thoughts that the plane crash was not just a bad plane? [brief interruption] I don't want to plant seeds. Bobby Kennedy, MLK – I'm just asking for your opinion. This was a guy, if you look back in the 1960's he was a very powerful man.*

**KB** He was a visionary and a very powerful person. There are economists who have planned for things to be done legislatively and economically, upon which our nation is based off of contract negotiations from UAW, just because that for many, many decades. I'm sure it's less and less now than it used to be. Do I think Walter Ruther was assassinated? I've always been suspicious of that, but I've always been suspicious of another thing. I don't think we'll ever find out more about that, than we will ever find out about what happened with John F. Kennedy or Jimmy Hoffa, or anyone else. These are things that happened and I've actually been involved in things deeply enough that at times, I've quietly asked myself, made sure no one could hear me. Ever heard that phrase "Gee, I wish I didn't know now, what I didn't know then." And there are times when I've start learning about things that I almost can immediately tell you, "I want to stay away from this. I don't want to be in that." There were things that happened in this local Union that had ramifications that spread out to other places outside of Michigan even. Can I say with any confidence that it had anything to do with anything? Not really. I think there's at least a 49% chance that something really did go wrong with the pilot or the aircraft and made it go down. At the same time I think there's also a 49% chance that Harvey Oswald didn't kill our President. Who knows?

**ES** *We'll never know.*

**KB** There's at least 51% chance that it's not true that Jimmy Hoffa's body is somewhere downtown in part of the foundation of the Renaissance Center. Now do I think that these things can be entirely ruled out? No, not at all. And do I think that there are people the same way they would assassinate a President or even plan to? There are not people whose best solution to every day problems is they need to cut the head off the dragon? As ridiculous as that does and should seem to anyone, it's tragic, but it does. I'm thankful that there hasn't been more of it. There are lots of other nations who are trying to conduct democracies, business as usual in their nations and a lot of tragic things happen on a far more frequent basis than other places than they do in the United States. We have been very lucky it hasn't been worse.

**ES** *You began 1970 on the assembly lines and retired when.*

**KB** May 8<sup>th</sup>. Retired June 30, 2008.

**ES** *Now today for the record, you are Karl Burnett, President of the Livonia Democratic Club, First Vice Chair, 11<sup>th</sup> District Democratic Organization. So you have a pretty good Democratic Organization here.*

**KB** I'm also a Delegate to the Democratic States Summit Committee for Michigan Democratic Party.

**ES** *Are you? Is that like a super delegate?*

**KB** Yes, I'll be in Port Huron Saturday morning.

**ES** *All your work with the union, how would you characterize Karl Burnett in a couple of words?*

**KB** A just had a phone conversation with a gentleman who said once, and it had to be a long time ago, because Frank Reynolds was still our Regional Director and we were still having meetings at UAW Local 157 on Van Borne Road, west of Middlebelt. When we were at a meeting one night and he said to my second, now X-wife, "Sharon, you know what Karl's problem is?" Sharon said, "No, I guess I really don't. What are you thinking about?" And Jack said, "Karl has this habit of taking better care of others than he does

himself.” Which meant, I think, as I told one of the guys who was a former President of this local union out there on the floor today, when he came in my office when I was recording Secretary, “I said today I think, you think, you can confirm with me now that you knew then even then and you know even better now whenever you ask me a question. I would give you the best answer I could and go back to the books and reinforce it and that’s all I’ve ever really been about. There are a lot of people whose idea of a contract or rulebook is, “As long as the rules facilitate what we are trying to do here, that’s cool but as soon as they get in the way of what I want to do, we are going to change it.” That’s not right. Why have rules if you’re not going to use them. I’ve always been for the rules. No, it didn’t get me an appointment to the International Union, a full-time highly paid job or even a temporary organizer job with UAW. But it didn’t make me stop me from becoming a unionist either.

**ES** *You’re a Unionist Activist at heart?*

**KB** In my epitaph, I have insisted and said many times in the past, it will be, “Wait a minute, I’m not done yet.”

**ES** *Karl, thanks for taking up the time to talk to me.*

**KB** There have been times when things were really good, thinking that, “Well, whatever’s here today, will always be here and therefore I don’t need to be an activist or whatever. In connection with that, there’s also been times as a unionist and an official of this local union in the past, been on the Executive Board about ten and a half years I spent. Unfortunately, there have been times when the elected officials that I need assistance from myself in the work place turned out to be people I was more weary of than the management in the facility in the first place. Again, in relations to other things we’ve discussed today. That didn’t make me leave the union, it didn’t make me an anti-unionist, it didn’t make me happy about my union or the state it was in. And yet, it has had me ponder at times, how can we change the union to make is so that this would not happen? There are lots of unions who have different ways of appointing or electing their representatives and the people who have the job of enforcing the contracts and the Constitution provisions, and so on and so on. I’m sure there’s a better way of doing it out there.

**ES** *There are good and better ways in all organizations. Some work more from the heart than others, is what you are saying? Is there a specific example of that?*

**KB** I was a time I was disqualified from my job. In the traditional and historical way of negotiating and settling grievances, they through out my grievance when in fact I had already been a machinist and autoworker for 25 years and I knew what supervision, the defense was trying to charge me with was attributed to a dye cast metal supplier that we purchased parts from, rather than from what we did, and it through what we did regularly in the department, managed to conceal the problem to the point where it was just about to bust loose at the seams, but it we didn’t give it that much of a chance. Some parts slipped through that had a defect that was actually attributed to the supplier. There were other people in the plant who may have had problems that they couldn’t justify, the grievances were traded off. Eventually, I found myself in some less desirable, different job that I didn’t want to do. I would have rather been doing what I was doing in the first place.

**ES** *Is there some trading off of grievances?*

**KB** Sure, that’s an historically way of doing old way of doing things. I have friends in the system, like myself, who always said, “Every grievance should stand on it’s own merit.” That has not been historically correct.

**ES** *We’ll give you these two, but we are going to take this one.*

**KB** It’s was usually we’ll give you this one and we’ll take these other five back. That’s what it really comes down to. Especially when you have people who are not successful negotiators. They’re unsuccessful. And you asked about Walter Reuther. I’m going to

add to this and you can patch it back in. There are leaders and there are followers. Sometimes the followers get to be leaders and that's unfortunate. I have the book, "Brother's Reuther" and I have read it. After reading such a book, you can't come away with anything other than, "What a remarkable, visionary person, he really was." He said for example in the 1950s, "I don't want company healthcare and hospitalization provided for my members." He actually was an advocate of national healthcare, which President Obama has now exceeded in finally, almost cheating for us. He has to some extent, but now the U.S. Supreme Courts, this month, is going to render a decision on the mandatory subscription clause. We don't know how that's going to come out. In any case, if it doesn't come out with that, it could hamper implementing some of the other provision or many of the provisions of that national healthcare plan. Walter Reuther did not want to see that become a prerogative to employment to be offered to people, to attract people to work for them. He wanted to see everyone in the country taken care of.

**ES** *That's visionary.*

**KB** Yes, and there are so many things that organized labor has done, that so few people generally recognize as having been performed or succeeded by organized labor that they benefit from everyday.

**ES** *White collar workers and union workers....*

**KB** Everybody.

**ES** *Name the ones that come to your mind.*

**KB** Right out of service how about pensions? How about paid vacations by the company? How about the 8-hour workday? How about the 40-hour week?

**ES** *The seniority system. The job security.*

**KB** If you are not in an unionized work place for all purposes there really isn't a seniority system. After 18 years at a telecompany, my wife can tell you, she can attest to that. She's now working for a different telecompany. She was the second longest serving there when she was told her job was absorbed and she was on layoff after coming back from major surgery. She took off work. Trained the core elements of her job to the only person that was there, longer than her and when she came back, she was told her job had been absorbed and she was gone. She had legal recourse under the NLRB, she just chose not to pursue it. She was out for over a year and then she got a contact and got a job at another place. There are some people who want to be leaders because they just love being in front and love a microphone. But there are people who are visionary's, genuine leaders, people who are pioneers. Why did our American folk pioneers become famous? Jim Bridger, Davey Crocket, Sam Houston, Lincoln, Washington, Ben Franklin, Walter Reuther. Why did his life have to end? Maybe we know, maybe we don't. [The researcher concludes the interview]





Karl Burnett (L) with the researcher in the offices of UAW Local 22 in Detroit.



Retiree meeting at UAW Local 22, June 21, 2012.