

Stan Johnson speaking at Paper Conference Pittsburgh, PA; August, 2010

Excerpt:

A staff member came to me and said one of our local presidents told him the other day that they had a member that came to them and said they want a cheap union.

A cheap union – the same kind of short-sighted mentality that destroyed US manufacturing in apparel, shoes, toys, electronics, the automobile industry and who knows whatever else. They want a cheap union! Well I guess they want cheap paper, imported from overseas, cheap tissue, cheap boxes and want to go to Wal Mart to buy it. That is the most insane statement that anyone could ever make!

Cheap has already cost us millions of family and community supportive jobs, made us all work harder, work longer for less, decimated the middle class and put a nation of Ford, Chrysler and GM owners into Hyundai's, Kia's, and soon-to-come Chinese cars. That's what cheap gets! That doesn't create jobs. That doesn't create wealth. That doesn't create income. That creates the race to the bottom. That's what cheap does so the next time somebody says they want a cheap union. They don't know what they want.

We're not a cheap union and, quite frankly, we're proud not be to a cheap union. You've heard people this morning say what the USW, our union, all of us together, have done. We've done it because it's the right thing to do not because it's a big shop or small shop. Not because it was International Paper or some little mom and pop shop somewhere else. We did it because it's the union thing to do. We have the resources available and we'll put the resources on the ground where they're needed. If you need help, you want help and you deserve help in this union, you're going to get help. But help doesn't come free! Help has a price. I know you all get it and I'm going to give you two or three brief pointers as to what you can say to people when they start griping about the dues.

Ask them what they want to give up.

- Ask them if they want us to give up filing trade cases to protect the paper industry.
- Ask them if they want us to sit on the sidelines and let China, Indonesia, Thailand and every other country in the world dump their paper goods here and put us out of work.
- Ask them if they want one of the best and brightest legal teams to fight for them in contract actions to prepare the local to do what they need to do in bargaining.
- Ask them if they're willing to give up the expertise in bankruptcy. Ask our brothers and sisters at AbitibiBowater and Smurfit-Stone if they're willing to give up the expertise in bankruptcy. That is the only thing that saved them going in.

They're arrogant sons-of-bitches and they sat there and told us they would not go into bankruptcy, never would, no way, no how. And guess what – they ended up exactly where we told them they were headed because we knew in advance, because we had the resources to tell in advance and they didn't even know themselves.

- Ask them if they want to give up bargaining where you get successorship.
- Ask them if they want to stand on the outside looking in like our brothers and sisters did in Brewton, Alabama. That's another location that comes fresh to mind where about 500 Steelworker brothers and sisters went and protested on a stormy night in the rain and the lightening. I thought, my God we're going to get everybody killed here. They were told to reapply for their jobs, not at the mill but at the city building, and they might consider them for hiring. The union stepped up in Brewton. We did what was necessary and those people, all the people that wanted their jobs back, got their jobs back. They all came back that wanted to come back. No one was put out because of their physical condition; no one was put out because of their work record. Every one that wanted to come back came back to that mill and came back to that mill with a contract. That is what this union is about!
- Ask them if they want to give up health and safety. Ask them if they don't want to know what the chemicals are in the plant. Ask them if they don't care what happens with repetitive motion injuries. Ask them if they're willing to give those things up. If they're willing to give those things up maybe they do want a cheap union. Maybe that is what they want.
- Ask them if they're willing to give up an emergency response team. I don't know if anyone in this room has had a member killed or maimed in your work place. I was at Linden Hall last Thursday night and 32 volunteer ERT activists were out there being trained for a week. I'll tell you one thing – that was the most emotional, dedicated group of people that I have ever seen. They worked together, they held hands together, they cried together because they talked about the tragedies that happened in their work places and they know they are the only thing standing between that family and a company that was willing to walk away. Ask your member if they get killed do they want someone to come and do something about these accident investigations, pursue somebody that did something wrong that caused the death or caused them to be maimed. Ask them. I don't think they want to give those things up.
- Do we want to give up corporate research – the kind of research that let us know that AbitibiBowater was headed to bankruptcy, that lets us do sector comparisons, lets us do industry comparisons, lets us do individual company comparisons. I don't think so. What about pension and benefits expertise, arbitration services and on and on and on.

The real costs of being a cheap union are far too dear to pay. As the old saying goes – you get what you pay for. I grew up in Tennessee and that’s an old saying that came around a lot. You get what you pay for. You pay for quality and you get quality! You pay for crap and you get crap!

It costs to have a good union. You are a part of a good union. I know I’m preaching to the choir in here. I know the leadership in this room gets it - has gotten it. This was done 5 years ago and appropriately so and we’re marching toward the date that will have an impact further on. All of these things we can ask our members what they’re willing to give up.

Very quickly I want to tell a story. Many years ago there was a man that was raised in a poor area of the Southeast. He grew up on a little small farm with 7 kids. He married and became a sharecropper. For those who don’t know what a sharecropper is, that’s someone who works on someone else’s land for a little piece of what they can get from that owner. That man and his wife had 3 kids, 3 boys, pretty quickly, and he saw that this sharecropping crap is not going to make it. I can’t feed my kids. I can’t do what I need to do sharecropping on this farm so he left and went to work in a woolen mill, in a small town, that made army blankets. He tried that. He was working, working, and working all he could work, as hard as he could work. Ends wouldn’t meet, still couldn’t feed those 3 hungry boys. It just didn’t work so he started looking again and he heard about a new factory being built close by – a tire factory – and he said, “I think I’ll go and see if I can get a job there.” It paid 10 cents more an hour, 10 cents might be enough. So he went to the tire factory and when he got hired factory management said, “Let me tell you something, boy. When you come to work here you do what we say, how we say and when we say because there are 25 barefooted people sitting outside this door waiting for your job and we don’t have to put up with your crap. You either do what we say or you get out.” And guess what? Like everybody else there, he did what they said.

One day a union organizer came and asked how things were going there. They said, “Gee, it’s bad, real bad.” The union organizer said, “We think we can help you.” So, they organized a union. Out of that they got union skilled wages because it was an industry that was already established, that there was union scale already in. They got themselves raises, they got health care, and they got things that they didn’t even know existed, quite frankly, some of them. That was the toughest person I’ve ever known in my life. He was as hard as stone. A little man, about 165 pounds but he was hard as stone - took pride in his work and took intense pride in his union and he gave that to me.

I’m no different than anyone else in this room. You may not know the person that did that for you but somebody did it. You might have been lucky to have been doing that for someone else - been one of the people that organized your mill or you work site. That’s what the union is. That’s what the union means.

As Director of District 9, we had a SOAR Coordinator -a gentleman by the name of Jim Swindle. He’s old as dirt, can half hear and turns his hearing aid up until it squeals. He talked so loud when I was in the office I had to close my door because he was screaming

on the phone. But I got beyond all of that and I sat down with Mr. Swindle and he gave me an education in labor. He said, "Stan, when we organized the steel mill we met in the middle of a field with one tree." I said, "Well Mr. Swindle why did you meet in the middle of a field with one tree?" He said, "Well son, I'll tell you why. He said when we were trying to organize the steel mill there were Pinkerton's hired by the company. They were seeking us out, trying to beat us up and killing some. He said but we knew we had to have a union, we knew that we couldn't survive in that hell hole without a union. So he said the only place that we could meet where we felt safe was in the middle of a field so we could look in every direction to see if the Pinkerton's were coming, and it's awfully hot in Alabama in the summer time and you got to have a shade tree.

That man, like many other risked his life, risked his family's life, put everything on the line to form this union. Somebody did that in the Rubber Workers. Somebody did that in the Paper Workers. Someone did that same thing in every union that we're lucky enough now to be blended with. They didn't gripe about paying dues. In fact, they paid them voluntarily, by hand, sometimes in secret. They met and gave them their dues and they got a pin, a little stick pin, that's how they all identified that they'd paid their dues.

They had to hide to pay their dues because they believed in this union so much! It's a crying shame that we have some members that will cry about \$20 or \$30 or \$40 or whatever dollars per month the dues might go up. We were given this! I was given my opportunity! My father opened the door for me. I went in at union scale wages. I went in with union scale benefits. I didn't have to fight for it. Most everybody in this room was given it but your father, your grandfather, somebody in your community fought for it. Some of them died for it and we owe them carrying it forward not cheap but like it ought to be done. We owe the legacy of their strife and their fight to make this union better, stronger and last longer than any other union in the world.

If you would like to view this speech you can find it on the internet at:
<http://tinyurl.com/27fs558>