Dedication

“Membership Action” is dedicated to Dorothy Stevens and my Brothers and Sisters—past, present, and future—of UAW Local 602, Lansing, Michigan.

*Solidarity Forever!*
Membership *Action*

By

D. J. Gillespie
“Service is the rent we pay to live on this planet. We have all warmed ourselves by fires we did not build. And drunk from wells we did not dig. We must now dig more wells and build more fires.” —Nido Qubein
“I’m a widow,” Alma lied, wishing that much were true. Employers thought women with families took too much time off, so she multiplied her sins with a second lie. “No children.”

She signed the paperwork and walked three miles home. It was her brown-eyed Jenny’s first full day of grade school. Alma used the last of the sugar to bake cookies to celebrate. Snickerdoodles and Kool-Aid. Milk was for breakfast.

Harold would be too hung-over in the morning to hit her for the lack of sugar for his coffee. Not that Alma Whethouse cared. Their six children would be at school herself at her new job with General Motors long before he stumbled out of bed.

At $1.43 an hour, Alma earned more in a day than she could scrabble up for a
month’s groceries just two weeks earlier. Her first paycheck opened a savings account, another lie killing off Harold to keep the money in her name.

The savings account was novelty for the Whethouse family, and a personal milestone for Alma. She held back only the price of a Louisville Slugger and a pair of shoelaces.

Alma followed the same pattern for the next 60 days until a Louisville Slugger hung on a shoelace behind every door in the house.

She continued to feed the children on money earned taking in laundry and ironing. Buying food a meal at a time, Alma rushed home from work to cook it before Harold could return any unopened groceries to the supermarket for beer money.

Ironing in the middle of the night was tricky at first—not because she was exhausted from a twelve-hour shift of building cars at General Motors, but because her chafed fingers bled daily until her hands calloused. At least the bare wood kitchen floor cooled her swollen and blistered feet.

That was all right. Everyone accepted “I work at GM” as explanation for cracked and reddened hands. Explaining long-sleeved, high-collared blouses at the height of Michigan’s flame-burst Indian summer was harder, especially when her sweat-smeared make-up failed to camouflage the mottled rainbow of bruises on her face and neck.

Pain earned at the plant was preferable to pain at the hands of an out-of-
work drunk.

Harold raged every Friday night, tearing the house apart looking for her pay envelope. Six children fled to two shared bedrooms or outside, away from his maniacal screams.

When Alma grew tired of cleaning up his trail of destruction every weekend, she “hid” a dollar or a little loose change for him to find. At the bottom of the cookie jar. Behind the icebox. Under the bathroom sink. In an empty tin saltshaker on the stovetop. Anywhere Harold could find it without breaking more of their meager furnishings in his deranged quest to finance his next drink.

The Whethouse home changed dramatically by the first dusting of snow.

Alma registered to vote. She wore new shoes, purchased from a shoe store, not a rummage sale. The children got dime or nickel allowances on the sly for helping out with household chores, depending on their ages. No more bickering over second helpings at meals.

Harold woke up more hung-over than usual, sometimes with unexplained bruises of his own.

At the factory, Alma earned her share of Rosie the Riveter muscles operating the hog-ringer that anchored thick upholstery materials to the steel-framed car seats. She learned that sixteen years after the famous Flint Sit Down strike of 1937, men still made ten cents an hour more than women.
A dime didn’t sound like much, but multiplied by ten- and twelve hour days six, sometimes seven days a week, it added up to groceries for Alma Whethouse. Store-bought candy for the kids. Maybe even a cold beer for herself once in a while, but only after stoking her slowly-growing account at the bank.

Alma taught herself to cuss now and then, to put the men at ease and find something besides her ample chest to think about. She learned women weren’t allowed to work the higher-paying jobs in the Trim Shop.

GM kept separate seniority lists for men and women, Alma learned from Rita Warren, the only other woman in the Cushion Room. If “the boss” laid you off even one day before the qualifying date in June, you got no vacation pay for the year. Women were laid off first during slow-downs, their jobs taken over by lower-seniority men “with families to support.”

“Families to support!” Alma groused as she and Rita struggled to jerk the upholstery over the seat frame an inch at a time. “Do they think we’re here for the fun of it?”

Alma learned men outnumbered female autoworkers ten-to-one. Sexual harassment was the rule, not against the rules.

On December 11, 1952, her ninety-first day of work at General Motors, Alma Sarah Whethouse hunted down her Committeeman at first break. She changed her withholding tax and put the children on her skimpy, but better-than-nothing health care insurance. Then she applied her flawless penmanship to the form making her
the newest member of UAW Local 1951.

A year later, Harold Whethouse crashed up the back steps, stumbled through the door, and tossed his car keys toward the kitchen table.

The keys hit the floor. The table was gone. So was everything—and everyone—else.

Now a feisty Lady Clairol redhead, Alma Whethouse “took nothing from nobody.” Co-workers dropped their tools, cheering and hooting with laughter the first time she went nose-to-navel with a supervisor a full foot taller than her petite 5’2”.

The next day, one of the men offered her a ride to and from work.

“We got to take care of each other,” Max Strange told her, refusing her money. Max drove a big Olds and chauffeured three other married women to and from work.

Even so, Alma waited for them at the bus stop to avoid prying eyes on her block.

The union contract wasn’t much, but Alma memorized every line until she understood the formal language—all its clauses, subsections, and paragraphs—better than many of the Committeemen. Better, certainly, than the majority of the
men and the few women sweating beside her who left school young, to take monotonous, backbreaking jobs as penance for their collective lack of education.

Alma learned that men fared better than women under those early UAW-GM National Agreements, just as they did elsewhere in society.

But contracts are of limited duration, not life sentences. Realizing men had no stake in negotiating equity for women, Alma decided it was up to women to kick, scream, battle, and bully their own way to an even playing field.

No longer washing and ironing other people’s laundry for grocery money, Alma’s six children started school in 1955 with three complete sets of new clothes each. Santa brought them toys and games, with dime-store perfume and jewelry for the girls at Christmas. No shoes, socks or underwear.

Used to feeding multiple mouths, Alma volunteered in the kitchen with the Women’s Auxiliary whenever the union held a benefit dinner for a fellow member. Until 1961, GM only paid half the cost of health care premiums and coverage. A serious illness could leave a family destitute in a matter of weeks.

On work breaks, Alma read everything she could lay hands on about the UAW and President Walter P. Reuther. Union membership was voluntary, so she used her growing knowledge to badger her non-union co-workers into “paying their own way” by joining the union.

“If you wreck your car, you can’t take out insurance after the fact, can you?”
Alma attended every union meeting, taking the younger children with her if the older ones were too busy to babysit. The children took turns pulling a red wagon full of campaign literature door-to-door with her during election cycles.

When she wasn’t working, Alma attended every speech Reuther delivered within driving distance.

Not a large man, Walter Reuther was a spellbinding speaker, passionate about workers’ rights and social justice for all. He was charismatic, but Alma Whetstone knew too much about fast-talking characters. She couldn’t bring herself to completely trust the man until the muggy afternoon Reuther’s wife accompanied him to an outdoor rally.

May Reuther, lovely and soft-spoken, wore a sleeveless red-and-white flowered shirtwaist dress with a fetching, but demure v-necked lace collar.

In the Michigan steam bath summer, Alma wiggled her way between sweating, cheering UAW members to get closer to the stage.

“They make deodorant for men, you know,” she informed a smelly trio of cheering onlookers as she ducked around them.

“No bruises,” Alma whispered to herself, nodding in approval from the foot of the speakers’ platform.

As if she heard—though more likely Alma’s orangey-red beehive hairdo snagged her attention—the First Lady of the UAW looked Alma Whetstone
squarely in the eye and smiled.

Alma’s heart knotted as though pierced by upholstery needles at the alien sight of husband and wife facing the world side-by-side, hand-in-hand. Eyes aching, Alma returned May Reuther’s smile.

Both women turned proud gazes to the man at the microphone, International UAW President Walter Phillip Reuther.

“You should run for office,” Rita Warren urged Alma. “We need strong women like you to break up the boys’ club at the union hall.”

Rita’s wasn’t the only voice in that choir. Alma heard variations of the same song daily, from women and men alike.

“I’ll think about it,” Alma promised.

When Jenny, her youngest, completed cosmetology school and got a job in 1967, Alma became the plant’s first female Committeeman, “den mother” to 250 of her UAW Brothers and Sisters in the Trim Shop.

On May 9, 1970, Walter and May Reuther died in a plane crash on their way to inspect final preparations of the new UAW Family Education Center at Black Lake, Michigan.

Alma Whethouse sobbed like an orphaned child.

The National Transportation and Safety Board: the Federal Aviation
Administration; Lear Jet and its parent company, General Electric, makers of the plane that flew the Reuthers to their doom; the Coast Guard; and the US Air Force investigated the crash.

Eventually ruled an accident, faulty altimeter readings misled the pilots to believe they were flying higher than they actually were when the jet struck the green canopy of treetops two-plus miles southwest of its destination.

Nineteen months earlier, Walter Reuther and his younger brother, Victor, shared a near-death experience under virtually identical circumstances. An identically faulty altimeter in the same make and model jet approached Dulles Airport in Washington DC too low. The tail of the plane struck the steel girder of an inner marker antenna, forcing an emergency landing in a field outside the airport.

Another accident.

“I don’t care what they say, how many times, or how many ways they say it,” Committeewoman Alma Whethouse told to her grieving flock of UAW men and women.

“Walter Reuther was murdered.”