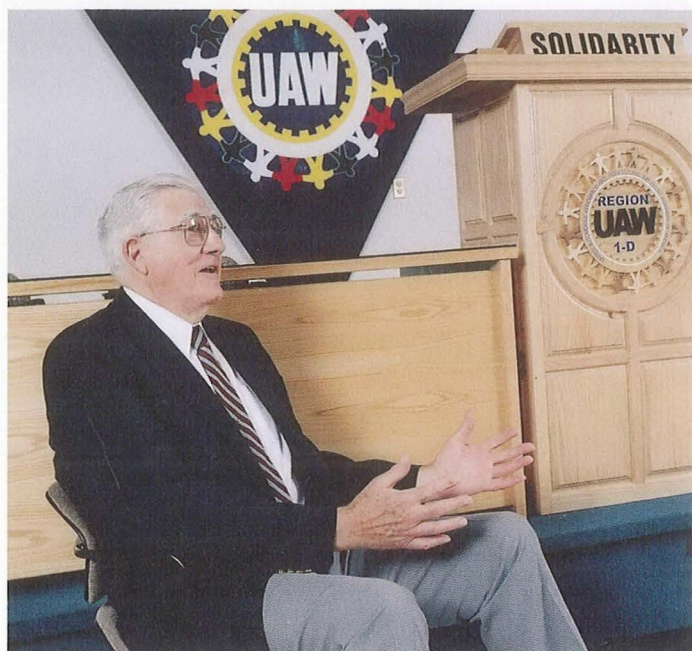


Q/A Owen Bieber



When United Auto Workers President Owen Bieber served on Chrysler's board of directors, he chose to donate his income to Grand Valley, establishing a scholarship for UAW members and their children.

As head of the UAW, Bieber helped guide the auto industry through its darkest period into an era of greater prosperity. His work on human rights issues — particularly in South Africa — has been noteworthy, earning him the union's Social Justice Award.

For Bieber, labor activism is a family affair. His father was one of the organizers of UAW Local 687 — the first local in the city of Grand Rapids. Now Bieber's two sons work at UAW Region 1-D, which includes 62 of Michigan's 83 counties, while another son works for the union in Detroit.

In July, Bieber spoke to *Grand Valley Magazine* writer Brian J. Bowe at the UAW's Region 1-D Headquarters in Grand Rapids.

GVM: The Owen Bieber Scholarship is one of the largest named scholarship funds at Grand Valley. Can you talk a little bit about how that fund was established?

Bieber: First of all, (former UAW President) Doug Fraser was on the Chrysler board for three years before I became president and went on the board. He had established a scholarship fund at Wayne State. His wife was a professor there at the time. The reason he did it — and the reason I did it — you can't serve on a board like that without taking compensation. It's kind of a ridiculous rule, I think. We offered to serve at no compensation, but they couldn't do that.

He established his scholarship there, and when I came on, I decided to do something for the area out here. And that's how I came to establish the scholarship at Grand Valley, and what went in there were the proceeds from the Chrysler board. We received \$20,000 a year as a board member, but in addition to that, you received \$500 for each committee meeting that you served on.

GVM: Back then, Grand Valley wasn't the institution it is today. How did you have the foresight to pick it?

Bieber: Well, if you go back to the very beginning of the establishment of Grand Valley, Ken Robinson — who was the regional director here before myself — was very active at the time the university was being established. The union movement played a part in helping raise funds and so on. Allendale was a great pick from our standpoint, because we had members in Muskegon who had worked on the program and who had contributed. We had people in Grand Rapids, and now the question was, "Where's it going to be located?" The people in Grand Rapids obviously thought it should be here. The people in Muskegon thought it should be over there. Allendale, as it turned out, was perfect for us because it was in between.

GVM: Do you come from a union background?

Bieber: My father was active in the organizing drive at McNerney Spring and Wire back in 1939. It was established as Local 687. Actually, it was the first UAW local in the city limits of Grand Rapids.

I can remember as the organizing drive went on, there was great concern of what was going to happen. I remember the night my father went to the last organizing meeting he said, "Well, we're gonna know after tonight whether we've got a job or not." Things were very difficult in those years. Wages were poor, working conditions were poor, so that I remember several people that were on the organizing committee at that time coming out to my dad's house for a meeting.

My dad was a staunch union person. He was a strong Democrat. There was a picture of Franklin Roosevelt hanging in our living room. In fact, it was still hanging there when my mother passed away. That was the background I grew up in.

GVM: Was it difficult growing up in a union family in this area, which is not looked at as being particularly labor-friendly?

Bieber: Yeah. I guess my mother's side of the family was a good example. They were about split down the middle — Republicans, Democrats, pro-labor, and, I don't want to say anti-labor but certainly not sympathetic to labor. The religious lines were sort of the same way. Some were Lutherans, others were Roman Catholics. And that pretty much mirrored the area. I was born and raised in North Dorr. Byron Center was about four or five miles from there, and that was predominantly Dutch, predominantly Christian Reformed and not very sympathetic to labor. So I guess I had some feel of what it was like for minorities, in a sense. I lived in an area that was not necessarily the majority for either my religious background, which was Roman Catholic or, for that matter, my union interests.

GVM: During your tenure as president, there were some very dark times for the auto industry. How did you strike a balance between protecting wages and job security, while at the same time not fatally injuring the companies you were dealing with?

Bieber: It was uncharted waters. You had two things: a major recession starting in 1980, coinciding with Ronald Reagan becoming the president; and the process of redesigning how to build the car.

In addition to that you had the onslaught of small cars coming in, and primarily the pressure was from the Japanese automakers. And I blame our own automakers, by the way, for getting us into that bind. Because had they developed a good small car like (legendary UAW President) Walter Reuther wanted them to, we would have had a product for the

market at that time and history would have been written a great deal differently as far as the import influx into our market.

I had the General Motors department at that time, and I had umpteen meetings with (former GM Chairman) Roger Smith. I kept arguing with him, "You need to bring back your people because they're your customers." This went on for at least two or three months. And finally one day I met with him and he said, "All right, I'm going to bring the people back." And they did.

But then, as the decline of domestic car sales continued and broadened, you knew that you weren't going to have all of these people in the plants for long. And so I said to Roger Smith and others at General Motors, "If you want to improve quality and efficiency, then you've got to be able to tell these people that they are not going to be the casualty. If you lay off 10 people today, the next 10 people on the list to be laid off, when they come into work tomorrow, what do you think is going to be foremost in their mind? Whether they're going to have a job the next day or the following week. Quality is going to become secondary."

I finally got them to accept the proposition that the only way they could do this was they had to take care of these people. And that's how I sold them on the income and job security.

GVM: Walter Reuther is somebody who's obviously a giant in the U.S. history.

Bieber: And rightfully so.

GVM: What are some of your recollections of him?

Bieber: I knew Walter, but I never sat in collective bargaining with Walter as Doug (Fraser) and Leonard (Woodcock) had. I had served on the national steering committee back in the 1950s. That's a committee made up of local union representatives from around the country in which Walter and other officers met with us and talked through strategies of what they were going to do, etc., including the question of dues. When my dad first joined the union, dues were 50 cents a month.

I served on several steering committees. Some of them were sort of bloodbaths, because you had to stand up for what the international union and the local unions needed to operate properly. I was on the national steering committee when we went to two-hour-pay-per-month (dues) and it didn't just fall into place. It took some selling. I'd seen Walter operate in that setting. I'd been to UAW conventions starting in 1955. The president would lead off the convention. Walter would speak probably two hours or longer in a sort of "state of the union" address. Today you couldn't get by with that. People don't sit that long anymore. But it was a different era. You were building the union. A big part of it had been built, but you were still building a lot of the constitution.

It was a different era. Walter was a great speaker. He had obviously a lot of foresight to see things the workers needed and he was a top negotiator. He had a lot of good people around him. And he was someone you looked up to.

GVM: What do you think your legacy as president will be?

Bieber: I was just given the UAW's Social Justice Award, which is the highest award in the union. A good piece of that was the work I did in South Africa.

I had the opportunity to head up the Shell boycott committee for the AFL-CIO. We started the boycott because Shell was the prominent oil company of South Africa and friendly with the apartheid regime. The next thing was when (Secretary of State George) Schultz in the Reagan administration set up his committee on South Africa, I was appointed to be the labor representative on the committee. I had been to South Africa once before in my role as president of the UAW. At that time the South African government had just lifted what was akin to martial law and the trade unions were just beginning to come out from underground. They had purged the hell out of them during that time.

I kept saying to the committee, "You had better look at the trade union movement in South Africa because I'm convinced that the government at some point is going to topple." And I said, "You have a vacuum for leadership at that point. Who else do you have?" The trade union movement was the only legitimate movement in South Africa that had any type of leadership training. Slowly I began to get the leadership point across to the members of the committee.

If the apartheid government did anything right, it was they had such a strong police and army force watching over the people that there really wasn't any way to get guns into the country. If there had been a way to get guns into the country, then it would have been terrible bloodshed.

The last time I was there, when I came back I said there'll be blood flowing in the streets, because the people were getting more incensed at the time. It was just a terrible situation, but in the end it worked out. Thank God it did.

GVM: So much of your legacy is focused on human rights. How do you explain to the average American worker why he or she should be concerned about human rights in faraway places?

Bieber: It's probably easier to describe today than it was at that time, or prior to 9/11. I'm concerned about some of the things the attorney general is doing or suggesting should be done. I have no sympathy for terrorists. But I am concerned that we not use tactics in the process of convicting them that could affect our own civil or human rights in the future.

When you see things going on in South Africa — workers being trampled on, ordinary citizens being trampled — or you see it in Bosnia or in some other countries, you become concerned and want to make sure like things never happen in our country or worldwide.

Today a great deal of exploitation is taking place in low-wage countries. I'm not opposed to trading with other countries — you'd have to be crazy to oppose that — but you have to have some sense of fairness in these trade agreements and fairness in how workers are treated in other parts of the world. Multinational companies will not think twice to move an operation anywhere in the world where they can get it done for a few less bucks.

You've got to be concerned about rights, not just of workers but of everyone. And what happened after 9/11, a lot of people got all revved up and (some people) I fear would have suggested you shoot every Arab seen in the following 24 hours. We have to be careful that people don't get overzealous and do crazy things that deny other people their civil and human rights.

