

## Auto Revamp to Get Steely Guide

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By Len Boselovic

Once Ron Bloom arrived at the United Steelworkers union in 1996, bargaining sessions between his blue collar clients and white collar steel industry executives, backed by their high-priced phalanx of legal and financial talent, were never quite the same.

Mr. Bloom brought the requisite labor credentials: time spent as a negotiating specialist with the Service Employees International Union and as regional director of the Jewish Labor Committee. But he also brought capitalist credentials most other card-carrying, dues-paying union workers don't have: a Harvard M.B.A.

The unlikely combination gave the USW credibility other unions lacked when it came to countering management plans for putting distressed companies back together. It enabled Mr. Bloom, 53, to become one of the principal architects of the restructuring of the steel industry earlier this decade.

Now Mr. Bloom faces a more daunting challenge: serving on a government-wide task force overseeing the restructuring of the hemorrhaging U.S. auto industry.

"If anybody can save the auto industry, it's him," said Leo A. Keevican Jr., a Pittsburgh attorney and investment banker who has known Mr. Bloom for more than 20 years. "The insight that Ron will bring is unparalleled."

When former USW President George Becker hired Mr. Bloom as his special assistant in 1996, the union acquired financial expertise and sophistication other unions lacked, said Michael Locker of Locker Associates, a New York consulting firm that has worked with the union. After graduating from Harvard in 1985, Mr. Bloom worked for investment banker Lazard Freres & Co. before co-founding Keilin & Bloom, a boutique firm that served the USW and other major unions.

Mr. Bloom "could run circles around" management negotiators, Mr. Locker said.

"He disarmed them to a large extent with his knowledge," he said. "There's nobody better qualified in the United States that I know of who could take on this task and be successful."

James Moss of First River Consulting, a Pittsburgh-based consultant to the USW, described Mr. Bloom as "exceptionally smart."

"He's as fierce an intellect as you'll find in an industrial setting," Mr. Moss said. "There's nobody faster on the up-take."

There's not much time for on-the-job training. General Motors and Chrysler, which received \$13.4 billion in government financing, were supposed to submit draft restructuring plans to the government yesterday. They have until March 31 to finalize those plans after negotiating concessions with the United Auto Workers union.

Mr. Bloom will be a senior adviser to Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, who will be part of the federal task force. National Economic Council Director Lawrence Summers will also serve on the task force along with representatives from the Department of Labor and other agencies.

The USW official "has a very key understanding of the issues and the dynamics of doing a restructuring of this type," Mr. Locker said. The Big 3's problems mirror many of those the steel industry resolved through concessions and bankruptcy, he said. His credentials include the ability "to put the deal together politically, not just economically," Mr. Locker said.

Mr. Keevican said Mr. Bloom counseled the USW to focus on making steelmakers profitable rather than on the number of jobs. While his union roots make him sympathetic to the plight of workers and retirees, he's "a Harvard M.B.A., so he also understands capital."

"Ron understands this will involves an enormous amount of pain for everybody," Mr. Keevican said.

**Len Boselovic** has covered the metals industry, financial markets, corporate governance and other topics and issues since joining the Post-Gazette in 1993. He has written his weekly Heard Off the Street column since 2000.

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