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## A HALF CENTURY OF STRUGGLE: AUTO WORKERS FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE

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### **The Politics of Autowork**

Throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century, American automobile manufacturers developed a new way to organize human labor—the machine-based mass production system. By 1925, auto work was performed by hundreds of thousands of men and women in huge factories built by the Ford Motor Company, General Motors Corporation, the Dodge Corporation, and other producers. These factories housed assembly lines, delivery chutes, and tools that were designed for specific, individualized production and assembly operations. Autowork was an efficiency-driven, continually rationalized process designed by engineers and managers who applied “scientific” methods, including time study, to develop systems that increased output per worker. In the United States, and throughout the world, American automobile factories were hailed by businessmen, politicians, and journalists as the most modern work environments; they were the harbinger of a universal prosperity based on efficient production technology and high wages.

In the 1920s, Americans learned that the economic health of their nation was tied to the health of the automobile industry. Industry publicists, popular writers, editorialists, and social scientists also taught the public to view the work on the automobile assembly lines as the best indication of the condition and mentalité of the industrial worker in the United States. Henry Ford, who had become the country’s most famous citizen by offering the general public an affordable car and by paying an unprecedented five dollars a day to workers willing to work at the fast pace he demanded, spoke for the entire auto industry when he claimed,

I have not been able to discover that repetitive labor injures a man in any way . . . Industry need not exact a human toll.<sup>1</sup>

But many other observers challenged this monolithic view. In his *USA* trilogy John Dos Passos mocked Ford's defense of mass production work:

At Ford's, production was improving all the time; less waste, more spotters, strawbosses, stool-pigeons (fifteen minutes for lunch, three minutes to go to the toilet, the Taylorized speedup everywhere, reachunder, adjustwasher, screwdown bolt, shove in cotter pin, reachunder, adjust washer, screw down bolt, reachunderadjusterscrewdownreachunderadjust, until every ounce of life was sucked off into production and at night the workmen went home gray hulking husks).<sup>2</sup>

Dos Passos' frightening view of autowork also found expression in the visual arts. Diego Rivera's murals, in the central court of the Detroit Institute of Arts, depicted the workers in Ford's River Rouge plant as dehumanized by the exhausting labor they were performing.

Many more Americans were familiar with Charlie Chaplin's satirization of the effects of unceasing, repetitive assembly line work in *Modern Times*. The factory depicted in Chaplin's film was not an auto factory; but the way in which the factory's owner and engineers tried to plan efficiently every minute of the production day, including lunchtime, when an experimental machine systematically fed an assembly line worker (Chaplin of course), captured the essence of the Fordist system's approach to workers. Ford and his engineers did not see the worker as a human being first and a producer second; rather they considered the worker to be one of several factors of production, all of which had to be utilized as efficiently as possible.

The Dos Passos-Rivera-Chaplin images of men and women locked into the rhythm of rationalized machine production established an important cultural archetype—auto workers “on the line.” Archetypal assembly line workers evoked the empathy of many observers because when the worker entered the workplace, his or her freedom was *severely* circumscribed. The dehumanized assembly line worker has been an enduring symbol. Since the Great Depression, two generations of Americans have been exposed to literary and visual presentations of this critical imagery of autowork: Harvey Swados' collection of stories about the reactions of auto workers to assembly line work, *On the Line* (1957); E. L. Doctorow's bestselling novel, *Loon Lake* (1980); hit movie comedies like *Blue Collar* (1978), and *Take this Job and Shove It* (1981). The experiences of alienated blue collar workers were portrayed in the songs of Bob Seger (“Feel Like a Number”) and Bachman-Turner Overdrive (“Blue Collar”), rock performers who grew up in the midwestern industrial

heartland. As the auto industry as a whole entered into a period of decline, management policies and the quality of the work experiences of auto workers were critiqued in Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989), a scathing film about General Motors' role in the deindustrialization of Flint, Michigan, and Ben Hamper's haunting *Rivethead* (1991), an autobiographical tale which describes how the monotony of disagreeable mass production jobs in a Flint truck plant dominated by insensitive, authoritarian foremen, psychologically damaged the men and women who worked "on the line."

"On the line" imagery has endured because it reveals hidden, contradictory truths about our automobile/truck-centered mass consumer society. The image of automobile assembly line work celebrated the great productivity increases that resulted from the union of human labor and machinery in the Fordist system, productivity growth that lowered the prices of gasoline-powered vehicles, and created the basis for the world's first true mass consumer society. At the same time, images of machine-like auto workers "on the line" also evoke the great physical and psychological costs of sustaining the productivity potential of Fordism, as well as our own complicity in inflicting those costs on fellow human beings when we buy the cars they make. In this way the archetypal image of auto workers presents the worker as both producer and victim, evoking a complex set of emotions—admiration, compassion, outrage, and guilt.

The authors who have contributed essays to this volume have been moved by the contradictions embodied in the "on the line" archetype. Their essays describe the emergence of the mass production system in automobile factories, the way that the auto companies have tried to manage that system, and the ways workers tried to use union organization and group job actions at the point of production to try to make autowork more secure, more remunerative, and less harmful to their physical and mental well-being. These essays focus on the experiences of the men and women who labored on production lines, making components or attaching components to the frame of the automobile. Large numbers of workers in the automobile industry did not work on production lines. However, constraints of time and space, the kinds of archival sources available, and our desire to more fully illuminate the politics of the experiences of the workers behind the "on the line" archetype have determined this volume's emphasis.<sup>3</sup>

As historians who have been influenced by the disciplines of sociology and anthropology, the authors have sought to go beyond the popular images of auto workers to examine the *politics* of the relations of production in the auto industry in the years since auto workers gained the right to bargain collectively with management about working conditions, personnel policies, pay, and fringe benefits. The politics of work in the auto industry were very com-

plex. Management directly interacted with workers on the shopfloor, with local union officers at the factory, and with national union officers at the corporate headquarters of each auto company. Auto workers formed many small, informal work groups that bargained with foremen and other supervisors, and interacted with union officials on the factory floor and at meetings of the union locals to which they belonged. The United Automobile Workers of America (UAW), the union that represented most auto workers after 1937, had its own politics within each district. Its national officers were often at odds with one another and/or with the rank and file.

No simplistic interpretation can explain the intricate relationships that developed between the auto companies, auto workers, and union leaders. The auto companies have always possessed enormous economic and political power. They had their way on most issues central to the control of production technology. Auto workers shifted between militancy and a desire for uninterrupted earnings; between anger at arbitrary management decisions and the knowledge that constant job actions and strikes would lead the auto companies to try to destroy the UAW. Union leaders were caught between the strong anger of frustrated production workers and the intimidating power of the auto companies; between the leaders' desire to preserve their union's organization (retaining the social prestige they garnered as "responsible" labor leaders) and their desire to improve the working and living conditions of auto workers in particular and American wage-earners in general. The UAW's leaders made mistakes. At times they were overly cautious or over-reacted to ideological challenges. But the UAW leaders worked very hard, aggressively, and imaginatively, within the constraints of the system of collective bargaining that was mandated by Congress and dominated by corporate power, to expand the autonomy and dignity of auto workers. The UAW bargained for the highest wages, pensions, health care benefits, and income security enjoyed by any group of mass production workers in the nation. Auto workers also benefitted from the UAW's bargaining for improved working conditions that made the factory floor safer and less detrimental to the physical and mental health of workers. The strong support that virtually all auto workers have given their union, even though many questioned some union policies and condemned the performance of particular officials, indicates that auto workers have understood the value that the UAW has added to their lives.\*

As the modern American auto industry took shape, numerous auto workers sought to advance their interests, and to enlarge their freedom of action and autonomy, by joining unions. Auto workers expected collective organization to bring them higher financial rewards for their labor, and to provide protection against the unilateral exercise of management power. Until the 1930s, these efforts, which at times involved significant labor-management

conflict, were largely unsuccessful. However, by the end of the 1930s, the UAW had become the dominant union in the industry. The UAW was initially organized under the aegis of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Most of the rank and file and grass roots leaders of the fledgling UAW wanted to organize workers of all crafts into an industrial union. But the national leaders of the AFL opposed chartering any new industrial unions (they would alter their view after 1938) and refused to allow the auto workers to form an autonomous industrial union. Rebelling against this policy, the auto workers took their union out of the AFL and then formally joined the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which itself had been created by proponents of industrial unionism who had seceded from the AFL.

By April 1941, all the major U.S. auto companies had entered into collective bargaining agreements with the UAW. Within individual locals and at the UAW's national conventions, many debates about production standard policies, strike policies, and strategies to increase and stabilize earnings were complicated by the pragmatic political maneuvering of the union's liberal, socialist, and communist factions, whose main areas of disagreement were in the realm of domestic politics (support the Democrats or a labor/progressive party), and foreign policy. A small minority of auto workers, with a syndicalist orientation, almost always criticized contracts which limited in any way the workers' right to conduct production slow-downs and to call spontaneous strikes. Between 1955 and 1965, auto workers in plants undergoing automation argued that reducing the length of the average work week was more important than bargaining to obtain higher wages and fringe benefits because it would have diminished the threat of technological unemployment. Throughout the post-War era, black auto workers often complained that the UAW, as an institution, did not do enough to combat racial discrimination within the union and in the auto plants. But auto workers were also united by their common perception that the executives of the auto companies were autocratic, overpaid bosses, by shared resentment against arbitrary and self-serving foremen and plant managers, and by their anger at the auto companies' frequent violation of collective bargaining agreements (contracts).

## **Organizing and Managing Mass Production Technology**

The automobile industry grew out of the horse-drawn wagon and carriage industry, an industry that depended on the labor of skilled metal workers and carpenters. Before 1913, most auto workers were also skilled workers: machinists, carpenters, upholsterers, iron molders, and painters. Almost exclusively male, and organized into small production groups, these auto

workers performed a variety of operations on the different parts of the automobile, building and assembling the components that went into a gasoline-powered car.

In the decade between 1913 and 1923, the industry was transformed dramatically. Technological innovations made the automobile a more reliable all-weather vehicle than the horse-drawn wagon or carriage. Farmers, doctors, executives, and many professionals provided the first significant market for the automobile industry. By 1920, mass production techniques and a technological breakthrough in the refining of Texas/Oklahoma petroleum had brought the cost of owning and running an automobile (or truck) within the income range of an increasing number of businesses, and allowed skilled workers to purchase the lower-priced models. Installment payment plans introduced by General Motors and Ford, and the rapid growth of the used car business, soon made it possible for most regularly employed wage-earners and farmers to afford some kind of automobile.

Inspired by the “scientific management” theory and methods of Frederick W. Taylor, between 1910 and 1917 Henry Ford and his team of engineers took the lead in reorganizing motor vehicle production, creating a mass production system. The Ford Motor Company simplified the labor of as many workers as possible, assigning each worker a specific, limited number of physical tasks. This simplification of the work process was facilitated by the assembly line and by the introduction of many single-purpose machine tools to produce automobile parts.

By subdividing jobs that had once involved many operations into jobs with many fewer tasks, management expected that *workers would labor at a faster pace*. Because learning a simplified job took less time than mastering a more varied and complex set of tasks, workers could be trained more rapidly. This made it easier to fire and replace workers who could not or would not labor at the increased work pace demanded by the auto companies. Since most auto workers did not need prior auto industry experience, replacement workers could easily be found. Enlarging the pool of potential workers also helped to restrain the rate of increase in industry wages.

By 1923, Ford reported that 43 percent of the jobs in its factories could be learned in one day, 36 percent could be learned within one week, 6 percent in one to two weeks, 14 percent in one month to one year, and 1 percent in up to six years.<sup>5</sup> Of course, all jobs, even the low-skill jobs, had a learning curve. Management expected increased worker speed of operation and fewer mistakes (damaged parts or assembly operations not completed) as a worker became more experienced.<sup>6</sup>

As Lindy Biggs explains in chapter 2, Ford’s job simplification was accompanied by the equally important reorganization of the movement of

materials and parts within the automobile factory. Delivery chutes and mechanized conveyor belts (assembly lines) were added to an increasing number of production sites. Instead of having groups of workers move from car to car or part to part, which created chaos on the factory floor, the car frames and car parts were moved from worker to worker. Ideally, workers, without moving from their work stations, would be supplied with the parts and/or components needed for the specific task they had to perform. To accomplish these goals, Ford and other producers had to build larger and larger factories, with more and more auto workers employed under the same roof. Auto industry managers also reported that the introduction of mechanized materials handling (i.e., the assembly line), which involved a well-ordered, *linear* layout, made it easier for foremen and managers to identify workers who were not working quickly and steadily. Those workers would be told that if they did not improve their performance they would be fired.

With the assembly line system in place, management now had a new means of trying to make workers intensify their labor effort: foremen could increase the speed of the motors that powered the assembly line. Time-study engineers, who noticed that a worker's job did not have enough tasks to keep him working most of the time, would often redesign the worker's job to add operations. While engineers often used time study as the basis for redesigning jobs to reduce the absolute amount of physical exertion and the duration of exertion necessary for each work task, time-study engineers often offset these savings by increasing the total number of work tasks the worker was expected to perform in each hour. Such restructuring frequently reduced the number of seconds workers had to catch their breath between job operations.

Lindy Biggs argues persuasively that the rationalized, regimented work of the Ford system was a new kind of experience for laboring men and women. Neither household activities nor previously held jobs prepared assembly line workers for their new work environment. As mass production techniques were developed in the automobile industry, worker turnover rates rose, exceeding the rates in most manufacturing industry. In 1913 and 1914, the turnover rate in the auto industry was 156 percent (annually), while a sample of eighty-four other industries had an average turnover rate of 93 percent. When the Ford engineers introduced their assembly line, turnover skyrocketed to nearly 400 percent.<sup>7</sup> It is very likely that the *intensity* of the labor effort demanded by the auto factories explains most of this turnover. The push for faster body movements, combined with the redesign of jobs to reduce the amount of time when a worker did not have to perform work operations, created a particular type of stressful work for assembly line workers and many categories of machine operators. The high turnover at Ford's in Detroit before World War I cannot be attributed solely to the unfamiliarity of many immi-

grant auto workers with industrial work rhythms. Wherever it was introduced, the Fordist regime was intrinsically alienating. The passage of time did not change Fordism's basic characteristics. In 1962, Ford brought a new factory on line in Liverpool, England, during an era when industrial work rhythms were certainly familiar to English workers. Yet the new factory had worker turnover rates that were as high as 33 percent yearly.<sup>8</sup>

Most jobs in the modern auto factory made workers feel "alienated." Sociological theory suggests that non-line workers, whether they were skilled maintenance men, tool and die makers, machine operators, clerks, inspectors, or warehouse people, were not as likely to be as alienated as production line workers. The latter suffer a) from the monotony of their repetitive jobs, and b) from a sense of powerlessness, since until unionization managers made all the decisions about the organization of work and had unrestricted authority to fire workers on a whim, an authority that foremen often used to terrorize workers. To make matters worse, auto workers often were not allowed to go to the bathroom until lunch or until quitting time. Many humiliating "accidents" occurred. Nor were the auto workers in the early mass production factories given any relief time for relaxing and recuperating. Working without reasonable rest intervals has always created considerable psychological and physical stress for people who perform manual labor.

Despite the alienating character of line work, many workers kept showing up at the gates of the auto factories. Why? Some were desperate for a job. Others were attracted by the relatively high wages paid by the auto manufacturers. Henry Ford introduced his five-dollar-a-day-bonus plan in 1914 to reduce turnover, and to give workers a financial incentive to work fast enough to meet the production standards in his new factories. Ford's male workers received their bonus pay only when they had demonstrated, over the course of a full year, that they were willing and able to meet the intense standards of the Fordist regime. Ford believed that women workers were not heads of families and therefore did not deserve to earn a "family wage." Many workers obviously considered work in the Fordist factory preferable to more hazardous and unpleasant jobs in mines, steel mills, lumbering operations, slaughterhouses, and meat packing plants. The main compensation for unpleasant, alienating work was financial: U.S. auto workers received, and continue to receive, hourly wages close to the top of the scale for the nation's manufacturing workers. High wages led workers to expect that as long as they held onto their jobs, they could buy a home, purchase desired consumer durables, or save to start a small business that offered a way to gain more direct control over their work life.

As the auto industry expanded, it employed increasing numbers of women. By 1920, women constituted 7 percent of the labor force, a figure that



was stable during the rest of the decade, but rose throughout the 1930s until it reached 10.5 percent in 1940. Women auto workers were concentrated in four types of jobs: sewing machine operation, materials trimming, small parts assembly, and inspection. Two and one-half percent of the jobs in assembly and body plants were held by women. The patriarchal values embraced by most male auto workers and management led to the exclusion of women from the highest-paying jobs in the industry. All the evidence at our disposal indicates that those women who worked on production lines were subjected to the same kinds of alienating experiences and the same types of adverse working conditions as their male counterparts.<sup>10</sup>

In 1912, American auto factories took an average of 4,666 worker hours to build a car. By 1923, the time required had dropped to 813 hours. This increase in productivity reflected a combination of new labor-saving technology, reorganization of the production process, and the increased ability of auto-industry managers to force workers to speed up production. As chapter 3 demonstrates, auto company managers in the United States also developed a set of regular practices (involving wage manipulation, altering assembly line speeds, and changing the mix of car types on the lines) which institutionalized the speedup during the 1920s. By 1930, as Phil A. Raymond, Treasurer of the tiny Auto Workers Union observed, in "no American industry has rationalization and scientific management proceeded so far and so fast as in the auto industry."<sup>11</sup> Among the manufacturing nations of the world, only in the United States was the productivity potential of mass production fully realized before World War II. Not even England, where British companies and Ford had built the world's second largest automobile industry, could match the efficiency of the American car makers. In fact, Morris Motors, England's largest independent producer, did not even introduce assembly line methods until 1934.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Depression Nightmare and the Auto Workers' Response**

When the full force of the Great Depression hit the automobile industry in 1931, insecurity permeated the world of the auto worker. Auto companies discarded the informal seniority systems that they had established in the 1920s. Older workers were especially vulnerable to layoffs, while younger workers, and friends of foremen and mill managers, were given preference for most of the jobs that remained, and for the jobs that were restored when auto factories rehired in response to upswings in consumer demand. Auto workers were also hit with the worst speedup in the history of American manufacturing, described in great detail in chapter 3. Plant superintendents and foremen

drove their workers at an inhumane pace that increased injuries and undermined the mental and physical health of the men and women who were “lucky” enough to have kept their jobs. It is clear that the significant speedup of auto work that has been implemented in the last twenty years is not even remotely comparable to the grueling intensity of labor that existed in most auto plants in the 1930s.

When, in 1937, auto workers were finally able to force GM and Chrysler to bargain with unions controlled by the workers, as opposed to company-financed unions, the workers used independent union organization and direct action on the shopfloor to fight the hellish speedup. Reductions in the intensity of labor were achieved in many factories. Auto workers also pressed for formal, contractually mandated seniority plans similar to the ones that the National Recovery Administration had promulgated in March 1934.<sup>13</sup> Effective seniority plans were expected to promote three types of security. First, seniority would reduce the ability of foremen and managers to play favorites, and extort bribes when hiring, promoting, and laying off workers. Second, seniority would protect older workers against being laid off because management wanted younger workers who would work for lower wages and who could withstand a faster work pace and large amounts of overtime. Third, seniority would allow workers, especially *as they aged*, the option of using their seniority rights to switch to less strenuous jobs. (Such jobs often had lower pay.)<sup>14</sup>

Ten years of worker struggles were necessary before the auto industry was fully unionized in 1941. Numerous strikes, both small and large, were staged by auto workers between 1930 and 1936, but the crucial breakthrough in unionization did not come until after Franklin D. Roosevelt’s re-election in November 1936. The recently created militant Congress of Industrial Organizations provided vital support to the auto workers and their struggling union, the UAW. When a few thousand activist workers seized control of two strategic General Motors plants in Flint, Michigan, at the end of 1936, their confrontational tactics succeeded because Frank Murphy, the newly elected governor of Michigan, was a New Deal liberal who backed unionization, and because John L. Lewis, the head of the CIO, who came to Detroit to lead the strike, was a charismatic leader and an intimidating negotiator. Pressured by the Roosevelt Administration, which believed that General Motors was deliberately violating the National Labor Relations Act, GM finally accorded the UAW limited recognition on February 11, 1937. The following month the UAW obtained a contract that made it the sole bargaining agent at all GM factories. Chrysler Corporation signed a contract with the UAW on April 6, 1937. Briggs, a major independent producer of car bodies, came round by the end of the year, but the adamantly anti-union Henry Ford held out until April 1941.

After the advent of collective bargaining at GM, Chrysler, and Ford many workers felt empowered and took direct action to diminish the work pace by using physical assaults, slowdowns, sit-downs, quickie strikes, and even sabotage. Some workers threatened bodily harm to foremen who enforced production standards. Fellow workers who refused to participate in production slowdowns, or in compacts by piece rate workers to avoid exceeding base rate levels by a large margin, were also harassed. These tactics reflected the historically conditioned, deep-seated fears auto workers had of being over-worked or of producing themselves out of a job.

Following its limited recognition of the UAW in 1937, GM was initially reluctant to punish workers for militant shopfloor actions, fearing that retribution would bring additional worker protests. But the national economy began to slump disastrously in the fall of 1937,<sup>15</sup> and the UAW split, with a conservative faction led by its first president seceding and affiliating with the AFL. Capitalizing on the division, GM's management cracked down on shopfloor protest. In September 1937, GM forced the UAW to accept a contract revision that obligated the union to discipline workers engaging in job actions and wildcat strikes. Failure of the UAW to implement this clause would "be deemed a breach of the agreement and a just cause for immediate suspension or cancellation" by GM.<sup>16</sup> This management position was consistent with the National Labor Relations Act, which banned wildcat strikes, although the law did not attach any automatic penalties to unions or workers involved in such strikes. Since the turn of the century, employers who had been willing to bargain with unions had insisted that unions prevent wildcat strikes. Auto manufacturers, whose profits depended on the coordination of the manufacture and assembly of thousands of parts, believed that they could not produce cars efficiently if there were frequent interruptions of production.

This was true, but it was not that simple. Auto workers understood that the extreme variability of conditions of production in auto factories—changes in car design, the various car models assembled by a given group of workers, the quality of the components to be assembled, and the number of cars to be assembled in a given week—would give rise to many shopfloor disputes. Of course, auto workers had every reason to expect that anti-union bias, the quirks of human nature, and the general elitism and insensitivity of managers would lead to continued incidents in which workers believed they were unfairly disciplined. Workers wanted these disputes to be settled on the spot, through negotiation between workers, shop stewards, foremen, and managers. Production workers distrusted any system that postponed a final management decision about a complaint because the passage of time meant that workers could be working under unfair and debilitating conditions. When arbitrators found that workers had been given unfair production standards workers *never*

received any financial compensation for the time they had worked under those standards.

The UAW-CIO defeated the AFL faction in a series of National Labor Relations Board elections in 1939–1940. During this period auto workers did not have union contracts, which meant they were not constrained legally from job actions and spontaneous strikes. Chrysler workers were especially militant in taking advantage of this opportunity. In September 1939, at Chrysler's Dodge Main plant, management ordered a significant increase in production standards on the new 1940 models. Chrysler fired workers, and especially shop stewards, who had refused to work at the faster pace demanded by management. In the course of the ensuing forty-five day strike, UAW Local 3, which represented the Dodge Main workers, demanded a joint union-management body that would set production standards.<sup>17</sup> This attempt at bargaining for co-management failed. The Dodge workers were unable to get the new production standards rolled back; however, they negotiated the return of the dismissed workers, super-seniority protection for shop stewards—which protected the most militant leaders of Local 3 from being intimidated by the threat of quick dismissal or punitive reassignment—and the authorization of foremen to adjust production standards. The last part of the settlement allowed workers to pressure foremen to compromise on increases in production standards, although the Local 3 records do not indicate how this power was actually used before the outbreak of World War II.<sup>18</sup>

In an October 30, 1939 interview, Walter Reuther, then head of the UAW's General Motors Department, discussed the dilemma union leaders and workers faced in devising a system of shopfloor bargaining over production standards. Reuther, who would serve as the UAW's president from 1946 to his death in 1970, acknowledged that the UAW leadership had to come up with a strategy to help workers. Otherwise, he said,

They would turn to measures of resistance such of [sic] slowdowns and kindred weapons. This would result in the *wrecking of the union*." [Emphasis added.]<sup>19</sup>

Reuther's last statement is crucial. He understood that in the United States organized workers lacked a strong labor or socialist political party that could secure and defend national labor legislation to protect workers' collective bargaining rights. Union political activists were but a small faction within the national Democratic Party, which itself split into conservative, moderate, and liberal factions.

In 1938, conservative Southern Democrats and Republicans in the House of Representatives began a counter-offensive against the kind of militant trade

unionism and social democratic political activism practiced by the CIO. The Dies Committee, with the cooperation of the AFL's leaders, recklessly re-baited the CIO, misrepresenting the significant contributions of CIO radicals to the labor movement. Dies' hearings tarnished the public image of the entire labor movement. After trying to bring the AFL and the CIO together, President Roosevelt took a slap at organized labor, declaring "a plague" on both groups. Worried about the political and economic effects of the militancy of the CIO rank and file, Roosevelt deliberately undercut the liberalism of the National Labor Relations Board. He appointed several new members who shared his concern about reducing the support the NLRB had given to the organization of new unions and to industrial unions when they were involved in conflicts with craft unions.

In this hostile political climate, Walter Reuther and most other leaders of the UAW believed that they had to strike a delicate balance between supporting worker militancy and maintaining the integrity of the UAW as an institution. Auto management and the executive branch of the federal government pressured the UAW's leaders to restrain workers so they did not interrupt production too frequently. In the absence of actual worker control of production or a system of co-management or co-determination, which could only be achieved through national legislation, as in Germany after World War II, the leaders of the UAW believed they had to accede to the management demand that the union leadership discourage and actually discipline illegal shopfloor action.<sup>20</sup> To avoid losing everything the union had gained since 1936, the UAW leaders had to be politically flexible and pragmatic. However, as Robert Asher argues in chapter 5, labor historians have not appreciated the extent to which UAW leaders were willing, at strategic moments, and especially when auto management violated contractual agreements, to stand behind workers who staged illegal wildcats and job actions.

The most important limitation on the right of workers to protest immediately against management decisions with regard to pay classifications, seniority, worker behavior, production rates, and line staffing was the mandatory grievance/arbitration process. Yet even here it is important to note that the UAW secured some "slack" for production workers. In 1940, GM proposed that an arbitrator or umpire, selected by consensus by both company and union, would make binding rulings on all grievances that were not settled by negotiations between union shop stewards and management, or between higher-level union and management officials. Most grievance systems had three steps of negotiations before a grievance was submitted to the umpire. Step one involved shop level discussions between a union steward, the worker who had grieved, and a foreman or manager. Step two involved bargaining at the plant level. Step three saw the relevant UAW national department—Chrysler, Ford,

GM, or Studebaker—negotiate on the grievances that had not been resolved in steps one and two. Many auto workers were uncomfortable with this model. They feared that justice delayed—and the grievance process could take months or even years—was justice denied. (See chapters 3 and 8.) But most national leaders of the UAW understood the real constraints on union power.<sup>21</sup> The UAW accepted binding arbitration of most grievances at GM (1940), Chrysler (1943) and Ford (1943).

However, the UAW's leaders also knew that auto workers believed that disputes over changes in required production standards, and therefore the intensity of labor, should not be treated like all other grievances. (See chapter 3.) The 1940 GM contract stipulated that *production standard disputes would not be decided by the umpires*. The 1943 Chrysler and Ford contracts followed suit. These developments reflected a bargaining impasse: the UAW would not abandon the right to strike over production standards without achieving some restraint on managerial power; and management was loathe to give a neutral umpire *any* authority over production standards. Hence the auto companies agreed to legalize authorized production standard strikes by auto workers. If workers in a particular factory were not pleased with management's final response to a production standard grievance, they could hold a strike vote. A majority vote for a strike did not automatically begin the strike. Next, the International Executive Board would discuss the situation, and after notifying management of the strike vote, the IEB could authorize a legal strike. The 1946 Ford contract gave Ford workers a broader opening: they also could strike on health and safety issues, which were also removed from the purview of the umpire. As Robert Asher argues in chapter 5, Walter Reuther and the Ford Department favored aggressive use of this clause.

Thus, on the kinds of issues that were most likely to anger workers and incline them towards immediate direct action on the factory floor the UAW contracts gave workers latitude—with a strong degree of centralized union control—to strike on important issues during the time when a national contract was in force. Perhaps auto management understood that failure to make concessions in the area of production standard disputes and health and safety disputes would create a large number of *unanticipated* disruptions of production that would be more costly to the companies than authorized strikes, for which management could prepare. Perhaps management understood that if workers were not given some kind of safety valve in this crucial arena of conflict, there would be so much discontent that the UAW leaders would be unable to enforce effectively contractual prohibitions against wildcat strikes on issues that were supposed to be decided only by the arbitrator. Management concessions on production standard and health and safety griev-

ances entailed accepting a lesser form of production disruption to avoid a more dangerous kind of chaos.

Securing authorization to strike after the grieving process was completed could take weeks or months. Authorized production standard strikes could be very effective, but they did not offer workers the emotional satisfaction of immediate protest against perceived injustices. The UAW never had the economic and political clout to improve upon the *quid pro quo* that was negotiated in 1940, 1946, and 1947. It would never be able to secure some form of the social democratic co-management preferred by its non-communist left wing leaders, especially Walter Reuther and Emil Mazey, and by many rank-and-file militants. But within the framework of this accommodation, which the UAW successfully defended for thirty years against subsequent management demands for roll-backs, the UAW sought to give workers maximum protection from excessive management disciplinary action against workers whose protests violated contract rules.

For example, at the February 7, 1941 UAW-GM Department conference, department head Walter Reuther argued for giving the umpire, who issued binding arbitration orders, authority to rule on the justice of the *magnitude* of the penalties that management exacted against workers who violated contract terms:

A worker might make a mistake...but that certainly might not mean that he ought to have his head chopped off, maybe he ought to have just a kick in the pants.<sup>22</sup>

Such a worker "mistake" might be a deliberate protest against managerial policy or reflect the worker's inability to contain his anger at having to do an unpleasant job in an authoritarian environment.

The existence of a grievance system with a neutral umpire benefitted workers in another way. Knowing that the umpire required strict standards of proof before he would approve severe penalties, especially dismissal or long disciplinary layoffs without pay for workers who did not meet production standards, General Motors often filed lesser charges against these workers. While the standards of proof required to make the lesser charges were looser, so too were the penalties that were assigned.<sup>23</sup> Thus workers who protested management policy by not meeting production standards received some protection. *Even though the UAW often made only small inroads against managerial absolutism, these gains gave working people meaningful recognition of their humanity.* The grievance/arbitration process was not an authoritarian system. Its formal rules gave protesting workers some elbow room and infor-

mal processes further mitigated the impact of potentially severe discipline. Auto company labor relations managers did not always discipline workers who staged slowdowns or wildcat strikes. Management concerns about public opinion, especially if wildcatters protested serious health and safety problems, and strategic considerations, especially if national negotiations were pending, often overrode the policy of punishing those who violated the rules of the game.

## **World War II and the Government's Opposition to Worker Militancy**

The United States directly entered World War II only eight months after the UAW's victory at Ford completed unionization of the auto industry's Big Three. During the war, many workers in the auto and electrical industries successfully challenged management over production standards, forcing lower standards or higher piece rates. Flush with enthusiasm after successful unionization drives, and expecting that tight wartime labor markets would give them an edge, workers got their way by threatening wildcat strikes, by intimidating foremen and managers, by conducting unauthorized work stoppages, and by sabotaging production equipment. Management often acceded to the workers' pressure because military contracts guaranteed a target rate of profit, with all the costs of production, including mis-management and worker job-actions, being absorbed by the federal government. Moreover, the rapid conversion to war production, and the construction of new plants, as well as the expansion of existing plants, created a chaotic situation that often overtaxed management capacities, and especially the abilities of the inexperienced managers who had to be hired in large numbers. Under these circumstances, management in many auto plants often acceded to worker challenges to particular production standards. As Kevin Boyle points out in chapter 4, auto workers used job actions, or the threat of such tactics, to obtain favorable shopfloor settlements of work pace disputes. Other issues—seniority, racial discrimination, underpayment when workers were placed in higher job classifications but not given the pay commensurate with these jobs, wages, and safety—were paramount in formal grievance bargaining.

As the war continued, many auto workers were frustrated when management increasingly stalled in processing grievances. Most American unions, including the UAW, had adopted wartime no-strike pledges. Auto workers were torn between their loyalty to the war effort and their inability to legitimately take strike action to protest the denial of hard-won, contractually guar-



anted rights. Wildcat strikes were the answer, especially in 1943 as it became clear that the war was being won and that a tight labor market made disciplinary action against strikers relatively ineffective, because dismissed workers could easily find another job. In 1943, fully one-fourth of all auto industry workers staged some kind of wildcat strike or in-plant job action.<sup>24</sup>

But government arbitrators, appointed by the National War Labor Board (NWLB), would not tolerate departures from the grievance process. They believed production should not be interrupted by any type of worker action, and especially not before the arbitrator or umpire had ruled on a grievance. By June 1942, Congress intervened, passing the Smith-Connally Act. This law came down hard on strikes that were not announced thirty days in advance, making unions financially liable for the loss of production. And the President's authority to seize war plants that were being struck was expanded. The NWLB then offered unions a *quid pro quo*: if union leaders would stop rank and file workers from striking, their unions would be granted maintenance of membership rights that preserved the unions' status as legally certified collective bargaining agents. The large number of new wartime workers threatened the UAW's stability because most new auto workers had no knowledge of the working conditions that existed in the 1930s or of the struggles that built the UAW. UAW leaders feared that such workers would not understand the dangers of craft unionism and might be convinced to vote for an AFL union that challenged the UAW for collective bargaining rights. Hence, they genuinely appreciated the carrot offered by the NWLB.<sup>25</sup>

The NWLB's actions in response to a March 1943 wildcat strike, that began at the Dodge Main factory and spread to all Chrysler plants in Detroit, were especially ominous. The strike was in response to Chrysler management's overt assault on union recognition. But the National War Labor Board punished the UAW's Chrysler Department because it had not moved quickly and decisively to quash the production standard dispute at the Detroit Dodge Main plant. The NWLB withdrew UAW-Chrysler's maintenance of membership right.

As the war neared its end, rank and file militancy soared. In March 1945, Dodge Main workers, 19,000 strong, were angered when management unilaterally announced new production standards that required a 23 percent increase in labor intensity on the plant's main assembly line. The workers filed the appropriate grievances. Chrysler management violated the collective bargaining contract by not waiting until the grievance procedure had been exhausted before it sacked seven workers who had not met the new standards. Three days later, all the Dodge Main workers struck. The eleven-day strike was settled by the National War Labor Board, which did not penalize the strikers,

reinstated the seven fired workers, and *upheld the new management-set production standard*, ruling that Chrysler workers had no contractual right to stage wildcat strikes.<sup>26</sup>

### **The “Golden” Years, 1945–1975: Progress and Conflict**

When World War II ended, the UAW, led by Walter Reuther’s General Motors Department, launched a critical 114-day strike. Reuther’s strategy involved a UAW demand that GM give its workers raises without increasing prices. The UAW proposed that GM open up its account books to allow the UAW and the federal government, which still retained its wartime price control authority, to determine the validity of GM’s claim that it needed price increases to compensate for wage increases. Reuther’s audacious strategy was aimed at forcing GM to accept some kind of joint management structure, in which decisions about pricing and production would be made by labor, capital, and government.

Historians have only begun to recognize the long term impact of the defeat of this strategy. In chapter 6, Ronald Edsforth suggests that Reuther, who became president of the UAW in 1946, thereafter eschewed radical attempts to challenge management control over decisions about pricing and plant location. Rather, the UAW sought, and won, higher wages, greater income security (productivity increases, cost of living adjustments, supplementary unemployment benefits, and job retraining programs) and greater social security (group life, health, and dental insurance plans), a safe work environment, and management observance of the rights workers were accorded in the contracts signed by the auto companies. The UAW under Reuther also pressured the national government to adopt Keynesian policies that would increase general consumer purchasing power, thereby protecting the jobs of auto workers and advancing the welfare of all wage earners.

It is tempting to draw a parallel between the UAW’s approach, which involved strategic decisions to 1) try to equalize pay and working conditions within the auto industry and 2) to protect the U.S. auto industry against foreign competition, and Samuel Gompers’ business unionist dictum that labor should not kill the goose that lays the golden egg. The difference is that the UAW advocated means to protect the egg, especially the authority of government to regulate and sustain the economy, that the classic business unionist found anathema. The UAW’s national leaders made strategic decisions to protect the earnings of weak companies, especially Chrysler, and to aid the entire industry. These decisions sacrificed the jobs or work standards of particular locals or sub-groups of workers within the industry, especially in the years

after 1975. Minority interests were superseded by the interests of the majority. The minority were understandably irate, and charged that they had been ignored or sold out. This kind of internal division was inevitable. It made the jobs of elected local leaders and national leaders all the more difficult.

The UAW's lobbying for government policies and auto contract provisions that increased the stability and overall extent of consumer purchasing power, i.e., Keynesian policies, does not mean that the union's leaders viewed workers solely as consumers. UAW leaders understood the organic character of worker consciousness. Auto workers and other wage earners were *both producers and consumers*. No matter how much they enjoyed the security of home ownership, pensions that would enable them to have consumption security in their old age, and the purchase of consumer durables (autos, washing machines, televisions, etc.), workers were deeply concerned about being treated with dignity at the workplace, and did not want to be so enervated by an inhumane work pace, whether it was enforced in spurts or on a sustained basis, that they lacked the ability to consume and to enjoy their leisure time.

The 1946 strike wave, the most intense since 1919, produced an anti-union political backlash. In November 1946, the Democratic Party, which most unions had strongly backed, lost control of Congress. A coalition of conservative Republican and most Southern Democrats (including New Dealers like Lyndon B. Johnson, whose main financial backers were notoriously anti-union),<sup>27</sup> combined to pass the 1947 Taft Hartley law. Besides making expansion of union organization into the South and Southwest extremely difficult, the Taft Hartley law banned wildcat strikes, and held union treasuries liable for the economic losses that a wildcat strike inflicted upon an employer. In this new legal environment, union officials had to be wary of even appearing to sanction wildcat strike action. At Ford, the UAW traded a union promise to crack down on unauthorized strikes and work stoppages for a management pledge to refrain from suing for financial compensation when workers staged such actions.<sup>28</sup>

In 1948, the Democrats improved their position in Congress, but in 1950 these gains evaporated. The outbreak of the Korean War, accompanied by loose price controls, relatively strict wage controls,<sup>29</sup> and federal suppression of most large-scale strikes, made the UAW's leaders painfully aware of their political vulnerability. They became increasingly stymied when they lobbied for civil rights legislation, more public housing, and a Keynesian policy of government stimulus of the economy and government mandated income-maintenance programs.

Even the most dedicated national union leaders, who had come from the shopfloor and continued to empathize with the day-to-day discomfort and indignity suffered by so many production workers, were constrained by the

legal/political environment of the American industrial system. Sociologist Huw Beynon's cogent analysis of the political constraints on militant socialist leaders of national unions in Britain in the early 1970s applies equally well to the situation faced by UAW leaders in the post-War years. "No matter how radical or well intentioned the men who become leaders of the trade unions are," Beynon concluded,

their position within the union (and hence within capitalist society)<sup>30</sup> . . . creates severe problems for them if they try to put such intentions into practice. Without the backing of a vigorous socialist [political] movement . . . the vigorous trade unionist finds himself in an insoluble dilemma. He fights by the rules of a system that he hardly approves of, within an organization that has proved itself manifestly incapable of changing those [basic] rules.<sup>31</sup>

UAW national leaders, most of them social democrats, understood this dilemma. Within the constraints imposed on them by the Taft-Hartley law, and by the economic power of the auto companies, UAW leaders instituted policies that were much more confrontational than most union critics realize.<sup>32</sup>

In the years after World War II, the UAW tried to negotiate plant-level agreements to keep assembly line speeds constant during the course of a model run, and during the course of the working day. This policy was designed to make work on the production line more predictable for workers. As Robert Howard notes, the UAW, like other newly established CIO industrial unions, "developed a series of practices and protective measures designed to restrain arbitrary management authority by explicitly defining the rights and duties of workers at every step of the production process."<sup>33</sup> This policy represented a fall-back position from the demand to share management power to determine the actual rate of assembly lines, and the mix and spacing of jobs on the line, all of which determined the intensity of the worker's labor on the lines. Once *management* determined labor standards on a particular model run on an assembly line, auto workers wanted these standards to be fixed, not manipulated at the discretion of management. These goals protected workers against speedups that stole from workers the benefits—the ability to relax—that they created for themselves by *developing methods of saving time* on assembly line operations. (See discussion in chapter 5.)

From the end of World War II to the onset of the 1958 recession, auto workers experienced relatively strong demand for their labor (although during the Korean war there were some painful temporary layoffs), consistently obtained higher wages, and acquired new fringe benefits, such as retirement pensions and medical insurance. On the shopfloor they had divergent experiences with management. Speedups were usually sectoral within each com-