

# Car making: an industry at war with its workers

Huw Beynon

**The Chrysler strike is over, but this is only a respite in the industry's strife. Will things ever go right while present assembly-line practices remain?**

Every day, in the United States, 65 car workers drop dead at their jobs on the factory floor: on average, some 16,000 of them die in the plants every year, and over half of these have heart attacks. Add to these figures—which do not include the results of accidents at work—the 63,000 cases of disabling diseases, and the 1,700,000 cases of lost or impaired hearing, and you realise that the car industry wreaks as heavy a toll upon the American working class as did the Vietnam war.

No comparable information exists on the motor industry in Britain. A report written in 1973 by Dr James Allardice of the Ford Motor Company almost certainly adds substance to the view that assembly-line workers endure exceptionally high levels of stress. But the report was never published. The company, in a statement, maintained that the risks involved in exposing the problem far outweighed any good that might come of it.

The extent of the vulnerability that the motor employers feel on this issue was revealed in the Ford pay negotiations of 1974. Normally Ford's management team make a point of carefully responding to all the arguments raised by the unions in their detailed pay claims. This time the unions' contention that psychological and physical stress should enter into the negotiation was left unanswered. And this isn't really surprising. At an important level the argument is unanswerable. Given the mass production of automobiles—and notwithstanding the modifications at Volvo and Saab—the men and women on the assembly line will endure stress.

Work in the motor industry is occasionally dangerous; often it is hot, or dusty, or smelly, or noisy; but always it is tedious, demanding a watchful dexterity and a nervous endurance to carry out monotonous, fatiguing operations time after time after time. Few of the jobs demand any skill of the people doing them. As early as 1925 Henry Ford estimated that 79 per cent of all new recruits could be made proficient in eight days and that 45 per cent needed only a days "training." Fifty years later a shop steward at Chrysler's plant at Ryton described how:

"Young lads are brought in, given a welding gun and told to get on with it. A few steps, a few stabs with the gun . . . all day long. The line mustn't stop whatever happens. One day cars started coming up with floors that fitted flush on one side with a three-eighths gap on the other. I called over this foreman and I said, 'What about this?' He said, 'Oh, don't bother, it will all pull together.'"

And at Ford:

"Oh, they've got a great training programme here. A great training programme. I can't remember how long it is . . . two days I think. I'm not sure though. I didn't get any training at all when I came here but I think they get two days now."

What does this training involve? Do men go straight onto the line?

"Oh yes, they straight onto the line all right. You know the sort of thing: 'This is Fred, he'll show you what to do.' 'Hello,' says Fred, 'you stick this in here and that in there—I'm not paid for this, you know.' You either do it or you don't. If you don't you're 'unsuitable' and get your cards."

In the 1920s Frederick W. Taylor, the founding father of time-and-motion study, had a point when he remarked, with typically contemptuous characterisation that "gorilla types are no longer needed in modern industry." But he could also have added that the artisan was becoming equally anachronistic. *Deskilling* has been a central feature of mechanisation in a century that has placed the machine minder at the centre of the historical stage. Men like Bob Morris. Described in the press as the "man who stopped Chrysler," he has worked at the Stoke plant for 25 years. His son-in-law works there for ten hours a night, and every hour guides 72 axles off a conveyor belt and lowers each one onto a pallet. He says he'd prefer Winson Green Prison.

In the United States the lines run at their fastest. The euphoria which 5 years ago greeted the opening of General Motors' new "automated" plant at Lordstown, Ohio, came, undiluted, across 60 years of this century. *Modern Times* might never have been screened. While commentators gasped at the giant automatic welding machines and the fully automatic spraying equipment, they failed to notice, let alone question, the long sections of assembly line that remained, of necessity, unautomated. The lines at Lordstown were to run at 105 cars an hour; one job every 35 seconds; the same thing repeated a thousand times over an eight-hour shift.

A man who worked at Lordstown was asked what it was like to be stuck in the plant on a warm Monday morning in summer. He replied that he didn't know. "Absenteeism" (defined by the author of an official report as "the practice of workers failing to report for work on some slight excuse or none at all") is one way of coping with a job that almost drives you around the bend. But that still leaves the days that you do turn in. Quite a few people haven't been able to take this. James Johnson worked for Chrysler at its axle plant at Elsdon in the United States. After a dispute with the foreman, he left the plant, returning with a shotgun which he used to kill two foremen and a job setter. The defence lawyer claimed that the working conditions at Elsdon were such that Johnson could not be held responsible for his actions. The judge and jury visited the plant, found the situation there "abominable," and agreed that Johnson was temporarily insane at the time of the killings.

There have been other cases which, if less dramatic, reflect the same stresses. Gerald Williamson also worked for Chrysler in the 1960s. This time at the Ryton plant in the midlands. He describes his job on the headlinings:

"I had to fasten a plastic-type material to the in-

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side roof of the cars. I was doing this job for about two years, and toward the end of it I was getting so bad that I couldn't relax at all. I could not get away from the job. Even in my dreams I was always back on the track. It was putting a great strain on my home life. Everything on the track seemed to be a rush. Men would be running everywhere in an attempt to get a few cars ahead, so that when the bell went for the end of the tea break you would have a few minutes left to yourself. There seemed to be no end to it. The assembly track would start running dead at 8pm, when I arrived for the night shift, and it would not stop until exactly 10.30, when we had a ten-minute tea break. By then the men, cramped together, fighting to get a few cars ahead of the track, would be shouting and swearing at each other."

Williamson's doctor advised him to change his job; he should get off the assembly line before his health was ruined. Chrysler were not so sympathetic. He could get on the track or he could leave. He left.

Many men stayed behind, and in the 1960s and early seventies they were at the centre of the wave of strikes and "labour indiscipline" that affected British and American factories. On the approaches to the Ford plant at River Rouge a worker wrote in large letters: WE COME HERE FOR EIGHT HOURS—DO WE HAVE TO WORK AS WELL? At Ford's Halewood factories a reduction in the recruiting age (brought about by high rates of labour turnover) allowed many 18 year olds to work on the assembly lines. Attracted there by the money, soon they found that there was nothing else. They didn't like the line; the last thing they wanted to do was to screw on wheels. They left jobs unfinished; they plagued the foreman; they threw bombs of bostic into scrap bins, sending flames toward the roof of the plant. One day in the summer of 1969, they joined with the rest of the workers in the Halewood plant, and refused to work at all. It was too hot. The lines could run, but they wouldn't move. They wanted to play football really, but if they couldn't do that they weren't going on the line; and they certainly weren't going to be bullied into it. Ford needed cars, so the management decided to placate the lads. They opened the roof—was that better? Yes it was a bit better, but what they really wanted was iced lime juice. Okay: iced limed juice it would be. But the canteen only stocked orange juice. Reluctantly they agreed to it as a substitute. They drank it and then went home.

Incidents like these helped to persuade the car-industry employers, as well as trade union leaders and politicians, that a deep-seated problem existed in the motor industry. To run profitably the plants had to run continuously, with cars running off the lines completed and in the predictable numbers. Worker indiscipline deeply affected this logic and the depth of this truth had already found its personification in Robert McNamara, who ran Ford in the 1950s, before taking office as Defence Secretary under Kennedy. McNamara had "the capacity to bring detailed financial system to the almost total disorganisation of the company. He was brilliant at systematising, telling Ford where it was going before it got there." His belief was in charts; in facts and figures. Unlike most of the motor executives he was a Democrat. Living in Ann Arbor, away from Detroit, he attended seminars with progressives from the university. Described by a friend as "dean of the first class of American corporate managers," he held pronounced liberal views on civil rights and just about everything else save the workers and

organised labour. "Here," says David Halberstam, in his book, *The Best and the Brightest*, "his views were surprisingly hard-line." And they were hard-line because "labour" was what was represented in McNamara's numbers and his charts; a "labour" that was getting screwed on the line and reacting against it—messing up all the equations. "Bob was, after all, the statistician, labour's role [was] functional, not human, a factor rather than people."

But as the disruptions continued, the motor executives had to try—no matter how unimaginatively—to think about "labour" as people. Malcolm L. Denise, vice-president of labour relations at Ford Detroit, told how the rate of absenteeism doubled at Ford between 1966 and 1968. So, too, the rate of "disciplinary cases per 100 employees"; and the turnover rate went up two and a half times. He related these "difficulties" to a "general lowering of employees' frustration tolerance," and he went on to talk of a "growing reluctance to accept a strict, authoritarian shopfloor discipline," and of people who "almost habitually violate our plant rules." All this Denise put down to the social background of the "problem employee" who, because of "the loose code he grew up with, . . . is generally indifferent to the standards of someone else's society."

Denise's views were echoed by Thomas H. Fitzgerald, the director of employee research at General Motors. Work, he said, had lost "its religious character . . . and is replaced by a sort of popular hedonism." This raised, for him, the big question: "How much personal freedom is possible in a hierarchical, bureaucratic, authority system?" His answer appears to be "not a lot," and his solution to the problem of worker atheism was a concerted attempt to bind the worker to the corporation through "inexpensive means such as emblems, slogans, contests and sets of monogrammed glasses." No one took this too seriously.

It was left to a leading American banker to put the issue clearly on the line. Louis Lundberg concluded his talk at the "Western Assembly of the Changing World of Work," at the University of California, with the warning that boring jobs and planned obsolescence had placed America on a course that led to "ultimate collapse." His solution, if more radical than Fitzgerald's was no more practical. Only the abandonment of mass production and the resurrection of methods which allowed workers to be "artisans in their work again" could avert the disaster.

On this side of the Atlantic, similar people have expressed similar views. Wilfred Jenks of the International Labour Office argued that European workers were becoming "dangerously bored," and at an international meeting of motor-union officials Gilbert Jessup—of the newly constituted Work Research Unit at the Department of Employment—said, "Low motivation exists in a lot of firms in British industry, because people are not involved in their work. This leads to a lot of real problems such as low productivity, absenteeism, high labour turnover and industrial unrest. We are predicting that these things will get worse if changes are not thought about now." If the publications of Jessup's unit to date are any indication of the thinking that's going on there, things will indeed get "worse." But that's another story.

The assembly line has been used for the production of motor cars for over 50 years now, and Gerald Williamson is but one of many thousands of its casualties. There was another time when the employers and the state expressed concern about the

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"Five months of struggle at Halewood" (Liverpool: *Big Flame*, 1974)

David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (Barrie & Jenkins, 1973)

Richard M. Jones, *Absenteeism: Manpower Papers No. 4* (HMSO, 1974)

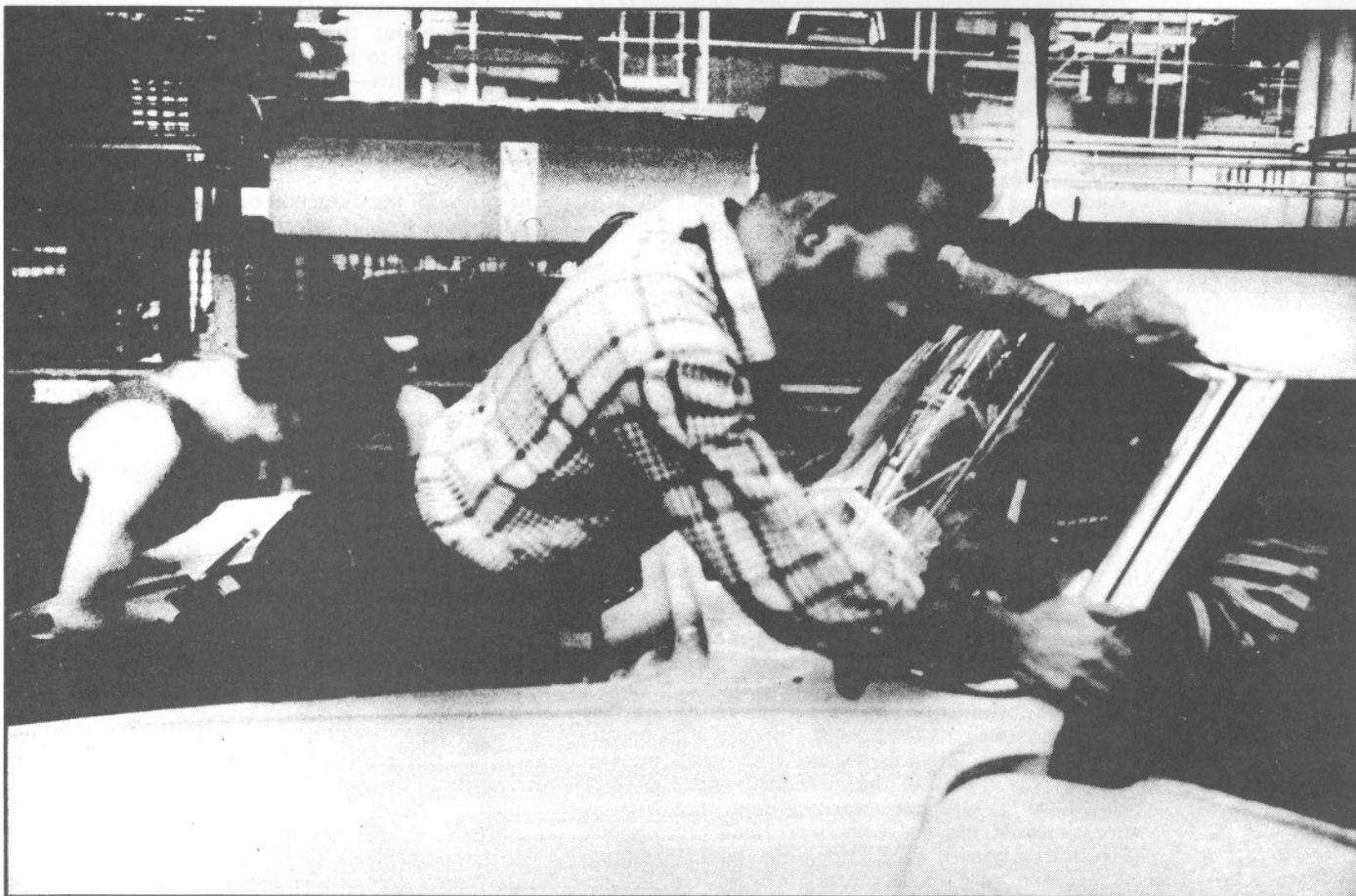
William Serrin, Janet Sherman and Sidney Wolfe, *Health Research Group Study of Diseases amongst Workers in the Auto Industry* (Detroit: UAW, 1973)

"The current economic crisis" (*Radical America*, January-February 1975)

H. A. Turner et al, *Labour Relations in the Motor Industry* (Allen & Unwin, 1967)

Ken Weller, "The Lordstown struggle" (*Solidarity Pamphlet* No. 45, 1974)

John Zerzan, "The revolt against work" (St Louis, Missouri: *Telos* No. 21, Fall 1974)



Ian Berry/Magnum

strain on the workers. In the boom decades at the beginning of the century, when labour turnover and "unrest" were high in Detroit, judges linked delinquency with the "repetitive tasks" asked of boys in the "modern workshops," and the large employers experimented in employee counselling and "consultation." But all this lasted only as long as the boom—because it is not suffering, but its manifestation in organised discontent, that produces concern in high places. Then, as now, it is not psychological breakdown but angry shouts that persuade these people to turn their eyes towards the factory floor in an attempt to comprehend a crisis rooted in the fact that car workers live in "someone else's society."

Now we are on the edge of depression once again. The April output of the British motor industry was the lowest for 14 years. British Leyland has finally reached the wall. The air is full of talk of "rationalisation," and our attention is no longer drawn towards the tedium of assembly-line work. John Clare, writing on the Chrysler strike in the *Observer*, could say that it is "not news that the work [there] is hot, noisy and boring," that there is "nothing unusual" about dropping 72 axles an hour off a moving belt (18 May). And he is right. Of course, it's not unusual; certainly it's no longer news, because the problem now is inflation and depression. That's the news. Save the ship before we all sink. The car workers will have to wait: let's get the economy straight, and we can begin to talk about "monotony" again.

But it isn't going to be that easy this time. The men who work on the lines, who make the cars that congest the roads, have themselves been made in the postwar years of the boom and the big sell. Younger than the average worker—yet recruited to the in-

dustry at a higher than average age—they came to the plants for cash. It was a Ford worker who wrote the Beatles' hit, *Money*: "Money don't get everything it's true, but what it can't get I can't use." Berry Gordy worked at the body plant in Detroit and wrote songs in his head to "help knock the day-to-day drag."

Most don't want to be car workers for ever. They came for cash, they endured the line, and they got laid off. This "here today, gone tomorrow" approach of the car employers—of whom British Leyland were the worst—produced a corresponding attitude on the lines. Strikes, go-slows, sabotage, bad jobs; these were all part of a situation where people tried to regulate the market and stay sane. To quote H. A. Turner's study of labour relations in the industry: "Car workers, . . . if they are not altogether 'economic men,' are probably more so than most other workers, and nearly as much as their employers." Given this, many of them have relished the "shorter weeks" that have recently come their way. Backed by the temporary fallback agreements that they have fought for, the loss of money is not too great and can in certain cases, due to dole payment anomalies, be even an advantage. But this is just the beginning. What happens when the depression really starts to bite?

Vauxhall has already made large cuts in its labour force. At Ellesmere Port, the company announced a voluntary redundancy scheme. Though strongly opposed by the stewards, this still saw 2,000 men taking a handshake which, if not golden, was enough to pay off debts and give a promise of a new life. "This industry is finished," said one of them, "we're just the first. I'd be a fool to stay on there on short time, only to get the sack at the end of it."



I'd rather take my chances now." At Ford Halewood and Standard Triumph Speke, the Vauxhall experience has been talked over and over again. "That's what happens, you see," one steward told me, "these young lads come to the plants, they get a deposit for a house, buy a car with the company then they fall into debt. Y'know £50 here, £20 there, £10 at the garage. Y'know the sort of thing. And before they know it the company has them by the balls." There is truth in this, debt can bind a worker to his employer, and it's not difficult to see how "redundancy money" can seem like salvation, offering rescue from both the line and the creditor. But there is more to it than this.

The labour market sets a limit to the use that the employers can make of voluntary redundancy. Soon it will come to a struggle. A steward from Standards, talking before the publication of the Ryder report on British Leyland (which includes Standard's), said: "They can't close these plants down I can see how they'd want to and how for capitalist reasons they should, but the government won't allow it. And do you know why? Because the crime rate would shoot up, that's why."

There is, of course, a lot of difference between individual acts of "criminality," or even organised looting, and a revolutionary social movement. But what is clear, I think, is that any recession—and this will bite deepest and earliest in the car industry—will be accompanied by widespread social disorder, and this is well realised by the people with power. (Note Mary Holland's casual revelation in *The World This Weekend* that a report from the chief constable of Glasgow, warning him that "public order" could not be guaranteed, finally persuaded Heath to reflate in 1972.) It is difficult, for example, to see the car workers being involved in hunger marches, or for them to show any of the "dignified" responses to poverty and unemployment that characterised so much that was good of the left politics of the twenties and thirties, and which has so often been raised to the point of sickening eulogy since. These are hard men—as hard as the miners but out

of a different mould. Certainly there is a self-consciousness about them, a clear understanding of what it means to be a worker—of who has power and who benefits—and this makes them a force to be reckoned with. Whether they have the consciousness of themselves as historical agents to give them the strength to radically transform this society, is not yet clear.

Since 1971 the trade unions have abdicated any chance they had of offering a lead to the mass of the car workers. Ford has been put under wraps since "parity," and now British Leyland is to be "nationalised." To the blokes who work the lines, this just seems like more of the same, and the Ryder report confirmed this for them. British Leyland is to be made into another Ford. (All the justifications for state aid have been couched in these terms, and almost all the new senior management are ex-Ford.) It will be more efficient "in capitalist terms," and fewer jobs will probably be more line. They've heard about Ford.

If the argument were not simply about the ad-hoc state financing of particular companies, but rather about a thoroughgoing takeover of the whole motor industry, allied with a socialist policy for transport—the planned production of far fewer models, an increasing emphasis upon public transport, a shift away from production of the private car to buses, tractors and so on, in short a policy which looked at production in terms of meaningful alternatives and where the "cost" of line work as gauged by the people themselves figured largely in assessing these alternatives—then that *might* be different. But such a strategy could only come from a fundamentally reconstructed political framework.

Without this, who knows? Chaos, perhaps? Certainly there's going to be a struggle. In the words of a man who spends his days making tyres for cars, and who can see little for him and his children in this society as it is: "We missed out in the 1920s and it's taken us this long to get back again—50 bloody years. If we let it go this time, it will be another 50. So we're just going to keep battering on."