



Manufacturing concessions: attritionary outsourcing at General Motor's Lordstown, USA assembly plant

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ABSTRACT

Workers at the General Motors (GM) auto assembly factory in Lordstown, Ohio, USA, famed in the industrial sociology literature because of their militancy during a 1972 labor dispute, have over the past decade approved a succession of contracts whittling down the labor force from 12,000 to around 3000 today. These reductions were accomplished by 'attritionary outsourcing'. To explain why labor has accepted such job loss, this interview project with Lordstown workers extends accepted accounts of deindustrialization by considering the political, material and ideological conditions underlying concessionary bargaining. As the tactic known as 'whipsawing' became less credible and consequential, GM turned to tactics that actively secure worker consent to job loss. Here one can see the replacement of Burawoy's hegemonic despotism by a despotic hegemony.

KEYWORDS

auto industry / deindustrialization / labor relations

Introduction

Labeled variously 'post-industrialism', 'the second industrial divide', or simply 'globalization', the last quarter of the 20th century witnessed two drastic changes in the American economy (Herzenberg et al., 1998; Piore and Sabel, 1984): first, the widespread flight of manufacturing capital to underdeveloped countries and a concomitant growth in domestic service sector

employment (Sassen, 1998); and second, the migration of industrial employment from heavily unionized regions in the north-eastern USA, to western and southern regions where organized labor is weak (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982). To put it in the vernacular, America's 'sunbelt' grew rapidly while the formerly industrialized 'frostbelt' became a 'rustbelt'. The effects of these shifts upon America's working class and the influence of organized labor within civil society are captured by a few basic statistics: between 1975 and 2000 the average worker's real weekly wage declined from 293 to 272 US dollars, while the proportion of the workforce unionized fell from 28.9 to 13.5 percent (Labor Research Association, 2003).

Several new areas of research have emerged to document various facets of this process of globalization. Researchers have specified strategies of first world firms to manage new industrial workers in third world locales (Fernandez Kelly, 1983; Lee, 1998), while labor scholars have documented new union strategies to organize non-traditional workers in the service sector, such as home health care workers, graduate students, and clerical employees (Voss and Sherman, 2000). While these issues of capital reinvestment have come to the fore, our framework for understanding the politics of capital disinvestment from established unionized sites derives from the deindustrialization literature of the 1980s (Jaffee, 1986). In brief, capital claims crisis because of competition, and uses viable threats of plant shutdowns to extract concessions from labor – labeled by Burawoy (1985) 'hegemonic despotism'. But does this framework capture all possible modes of capital disinvestment and concessionary bargaining in the contemporary USA?

The present research addresses this question through a case study of changing labor relations over the past 30 years at a General Motors (GM) factory in Lordstown, Ohio, where the author performed approximately 60 interviews with 20 current workers. Situated in a former industrial stronghold in the heart of America's rustbelt (Russo and Linkon, 2002: 131), Lordstown offers an excellent opportunity to study how corporate strategies for withdrawing work have evolved to conform with changing political economic conditions in the region and nation. Built in the late 1960s as a showcase for Fordist mass production, the onset of the global energy crisis in the early 1970s convinced corporate management that the Lordstown facility was overcapitalized, and thus began a 30-year struggle to downsize the plant's workforce. Initial attempts to revive despotic control (maximum surveillance and discipline to consolidate jobs) met with virulent resistance (Aronowitz, 1973), as did subsequent attempts during the 1980s to threaten workers with a plant closing (the paradigmatic tactic of hegemonic despotism).

As GM's economic performance improved during the 1990s, however, its strategy for reducing its domestic workforce shifted to 'vertical deintegration': paring down the assembly process to a small main line punctuated by outside loading docks receiving modular components, previously built in-house, from outside suppliers (Helper, 1991). In addition, requests for job reductions are linked to 'natural wastage' (not hiring replacements for retiring employees)

rather than involuntary firings. Lordstown's famously radical workers have, rather unexpectedly, approved over the past decade multiple concessionary contracts allowing management to deindustrialize the plant through such attritionary outsourcing, whittling the labor force down from 12,000 to less than 3000. Because this system of capital withdrawal involves not the coercion of economically vulnerable workers but the active consent of secure veteran employees, it constitutes a less conspicuous, if lengthier, counterpart to regimes of hegemonic despotism (Burawoy, 1985): deindustrialization through 'despotic hegemony'.

Post-industrial production politics

The standard account of concessionary bargaining was established by the deindustrialization literature of the 1980s (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982). It argued that the onset of globalization – particularly improvements in transportation and communication technologies – augmented capital's ability to shift production facilities to locales where production costs are lower (Rodwin and Sazanami, 1989: 11–14; Walton, 1987: 105). Increased mobility allowed capital to wage war on labor in two ways. Firms can move plants away from areas where labor is strong and wages high, to states with low unionization levels and repressive labor laws.¹ Before closing an established production facility, however, capital may engage in 'whipsawing': playing two or more plants off against one another, asking for various forms of concessions from labor. The most accommodating plant, presumably, survives (Lawrence, 1987). For instance, GM during the 1970s and 1980s deployed a 'Southern Strategy' against local affiliates (hereafter, 'locals') of the United Autoworkers (UAW).² Fifteen plants were closed in the north-eastern USA, and 14 opened in the rural south (Rubenstein, 1992: 238). And during national bargaining with the UAW in 1982, GM claimed economic desperation in the face of international competition and threatened to permanently close seven plants unless labor agreed to multiple concessions (Katz, 1985). The UAW complied, 'giving back' \$2.5 billion in annual wage increases and paid holidays for autoworkers.

Empirical case studies of deindustrialization in turn either described worker and community efforts to fight shutdowns (Lynd, 1983; Nissen, 1995), or documented their disastrous effects (Dandaneau 1996; Newman, 1988: 151; Zippay 1991: 10–14). These accounts took for granted that the interests of capital and labor are *opposed* regarding workforce reductions. Capital announces plans to close a plant where labor is strong. Workers, after 'the initial shock...move to anger', and resolve to fight to preserve jobs (Illes, 1996: 11). Management in turn 'crush[es] the worker and community resistance to the mobility of capital' (Rothstein, 1986: 178). Concessions then represent last-ditch responses from workers who fear for their livelihoods, gestures of good will and obedience to persuade capital to stay put. Contemporary concessionary bargaining at Lordstown, however, does not fit this storyline. There labor

has permitted the outsourcing of work previously done in-house despite: (1) widespread cynicism concerning the credibility of managerial threats of closure; (2) lifetime job security which tempers concerns about the consequences of plant closure; and (3) a history of solidarity fighting job loss. So why do workers approve contracts permitting management to outsource work?

Golden (1992) addressed the apparent paradox of labor acquiescence to plant job loss by comparing an Italian and a British auto factory facing corporate demands for concessions reducing the workforce. In both cases, management claimed severe financial crisis, with workers willing to sacrifice jobs to keep the plant open. In Britain, union leaders acquiesced, allowing management to lay off 30 percent of workers. In Italy, however, union leaders refused to allow downsizing and called a large-scale strike. Using what she labels an 'ahistorical, macro-level' rational choice perspective, Golden attributes this difference in union acquiescence to whether job losses were allocated according to a seniority system (1992: 411). In the British plant they were and so high-seniority union leaders were willing to sacrifice jobs since they (the organizational nucleus of the union) would be protected. In Italy management decided whom to retrench and so unionists, fearing for their own jobs, resisted.

Golden assumes that the principles underlying union leaders' preferences are constant (if selfish): to preserve their own positions. Different plant outcomes thus derive from different 'rules of the game' through which preferences become choices – i.e. 'the presence or absence of seniority-based selection mechanisms for allocating' job loss (1992: 408). At Lordstown however, the seniority system remained intact while the union's position towards concessions changed dramatically, from resistance to acquiescence. In addition, Golden treats worker acquiescence as a control variable (to compare union positions), without investigating why 'the rank and file appeared relatively moderate and largely unprepared to resist job loss' (1992: 419). The generation of worker views towards concessions thus goes unspecified.

Milkman (1997), by contrast, deals directly with the identities of workers confronting attempts to eliminate jobs. She studied GM's Linden, New Jersey plant, where a quarter of the workforce volunteered to retire early in exchange for a financial 'buyout'. Most striking was the lack of regret among these workers; despite a drop in income, they were happy to bid farewell to the hated factory line. Milkman's analysis of buyout takers, however, draws upon the deindustrialization literature's psychology of the effect of insecurity upon workers' capacity to resist job loss.³ She thus situates buyouts in the context of the threatened plant closings and the consequent pressure on UAW locals during the early 1980s, rather than the shift during the 1990s towards vertical deintegration as the dominant strategy for reducing labor costs. Voluntary retirees were thus disproportionately young workers lacking in seniority who reported concerns with job security as the main factor in their acceptance of buy-outs (Milkman, 1992: 85, 108). Unanswered is the question of why union officials and veteran workers at Linden facilitated and accepted, respectively, job losses. At Lordstown these issues are of primary importance, for there the

labor force and union are overwhelmingly veteran workers with guaranteed job security.

The conditions underlying (veteran) worker acceptance of job loss at Lordstown, I argue, are inadequately captured by (young) voluntary retirees at Linden. This is because Milkman's theoretical framework corresponds with Burawoy's conception of hegemonic despotism. While the radical tradition of labor process theory assumed the opposed interests of labor and capital (Braverman, 1974; Marx, 1977), Burawoy investigated how workers' interests are united with capital's, in and through the practices of everyday life within capitalism. By considering the material, political and ideological moments of production, Burawoy periodized three factory regimes under Western capitalism (1979; 1985: 8). Early 20th-century competitive capitalism was characterized by *despotic* forms of labor control, in which management maximizes control over workers who are dependent upon wage labor for survival and receive no protection from the state. Monopoly capitalism in turn ushered in *hegemonic* regimes, characterized by formalized labor relations (collective bargaining) and shop-floor compromises in which workers have autonomy to operate outside of official procedure (Ditton, 1977; Edwards, 1979; Friedman, 1977; Noble, 1984). By the late 20th century, increased capital mobility and further fragmentation of the labor process ushered in a third stage, hegemonic despotism, in which capital uses collective bargaining (through which labor won concessions in the previous era) to extract concessions from insecure workers 'faced with the threat of plant closures or layoffs' (Burawoy, 1985: 264).

This study applies Burawoy's method of labor regime analysis to Lordstown, though finds his description of hegemonic despotism does not adequately capture concessionary bargaining there. For Burawoy deindustrialization 'is a new form of *despotism*' (1985: 264), an observation which fits the conditions underlying the wave of plant closures in the decade during which *The Politics of Production* was written. Indeed, labor relations in the American auto industry in that period were an ideal typical example of hegemonic despotism. Economically, the large auto corporations argued that concessions were undesirable but necessary sacrifices to ensure survival in the competitive global marketplace. Politically, the US state placed minimal limitations on the ability of corporations to close down domestic production facilities (Carroll, 1987; Rothstein, 1986: 28–9). Ideologically, requests for concessions were effective because threats of shutdown were both credible (labor believed concessions do increase a plant's survival chances) and consequential (workers depend upon the company to maintain their standard of living).

Deindustrialization through this kind of approach became less tenable for corporations such as GM during the 1990s, however. The financial crisis which initially justified plant closings subsided – while American auto firms flirted with bankruptcy during the 1970s and 1980s, by the mid 1990s GM's North American Operations achieved record sales and profits (Kerwin and Muller, 1999: 7). Justifications for capital withdrawal based not upon firm survival but

Table I Conditions underlying GM's strategies for reducing its US workforce

	<i>Economic</i>	<i>Political</i>	<i>Ideological</i>
1980s: hegemonic despotism	Company in crisis. Global competition. Downsize or perish.	State complicit. Places no limits on capital mobility.	Corporate threats both credible and consequential for workers.
1990s: despotic hegemony	Company in black. Record profits. Downsize for relative profitability.	State oppositional. Regulation of capital mobility and plant closings	Corporate threats neither credible nor consequential.

relative profitability have met public and governmental condemnation as bad 'corporate citizenship'.⁴ The US state meanwhile passed (admittedly mild) legislation regulating corporations' ability to close their domestic facilities.⁵ Table 1 summarizes the erosion of conditions underlying GM's ability to impose hegemonic despotism during the 1990s.

Paradoxically, the deterioration of conditions allowing GM to whipsaw workers coincided with the commencement and institutionalization of concessionary bargaining over outsourcing at Lordstown. Clearly not despotic, this labor regime represents an alternate mode of deindustrialization. A counterpart to hegemonic despotism, it is termed here despotic hegemony. While the former is utilized in moments of financial crisis and through discourses of firm survival, the latter is deployed in times of firm prosperity and discourses of relative profitability. The essence of despotic hegemony, this paper will show, entails actively securing the consent of veteran, secure workers to concessions. At Lordstown, this takes three forms: empowering workers on the shop floor, severing workers from their union, and a symbolic disavowal of manual labor by veteran workers.

Methods

Data for this project derive from approximately 60 interviews with 20 current Lordstown workers. In 1999 a list of current hourly employees was generated from articles in local newspapers and informants in the area. After contacting and interviewing an initial five workers, I asked for referrals from each, creating four separate snowball samples and a total sample of 20 workers (15 hired prior to 1977, and five with less than five years' seniority as of 1999). Each worker was interviewed two to four times between 1999 and 2002. Individual interviews ranged from one to four hours. The first round of interviews focused upon general work histories, especially experiences with the labor process. Subsequent interviews concentrated upon the history of concessionary bargain-

ing at the plant and the worker's opinions of outsourcing. Since 2002 the author has communicated regularly over phone and email with four of the workers who developed as key informants. Two union officials and the general manager of the plant were also interviewed.

To obtain comparative historical data, current workers' narratives were contrasted with those of two intensive interviewing projects performed at Lordstown during the early 1970s: Aronowitz's *False Promises* (1973) and Moberg's *Rattling the Golden Chains* (1977). This article first revisits two unsuccessful attempts by GM to reduce Lordstown's workforce through despotism and hegemonic despotism during the 1970s and 1980s, respectively. It then explores workers' changing experiences at work, home and in the community, to elucidate why they have during the 1990s agreed to concessions outsourcing jobs even though management's threats to close the plant are deemed neither credible nor consequential.

The 1970s and 1980s at Lordstown: conflict and resistance

In 1966 GM build its newest, largest (3.7 million square feet – approximately 340,000 m²) and most technically advanced assembly plant in the small Ohio village of Lordstown. Decades of growth had convinced corporate planners that such a facility would be essential for meeting future global demand for American autos. Personnel specialists predicted, furthermore, that staffing such a monster would require a large workforce of dexterous and nimble, though economically vulnerable, young workers. The site was thus chosen because of its proximity to primary material suppliers in the north-eastern USA (especially the nearby steel producing cities of Cleveland and Youngstown), and because surrounding communities could supply young men⁶ isolated from political radicalism and desperate for work (Aronowitz, 1973: ch. 1).

By 1970 the Lordstown complex was running at full capacity. With the onset of the energy crisis, however, the company's large 'gas-guzzlers' were eschewed by a newly energy-conscious American public in favor of fuel-efficient imports. As sales and profits plummeted (Table 2), a panicked GM management attempted an 'experiment' at Lordstown. The plant would produce a fuel-efficient yet stylish small car, while management would streamline the inefficiency of its supposedly oversized and undisciplined American workforce. The former project took the form of the new Chevy Vega; the latter that of a notoriously strict management team, General Motors Assembly Division (GMAD, labeled by workers Go-Mad). While the Vega was marketed as an innovation in product design, the tactics utilized by GMAD were age-old. It implemented 'the most regimented, minutely divided assembly process ever devised': prior to the overhaul the plant produced a car per minute; afterwards it turned one out *every 36 seconds* (Junkerman, 1983: 20). In addition to speeding up the line, GMAD endeavored to cut the plant's payroll. Through intensified supervision and discipline, front-line managers would force workers to perform extra tasks

Table 2 The energy crisis hits GM

	1968	1969	1970
Sales of cars and trucks (000s)	7087	7160	5308
Net income (\$000,000s), 2000 adjusted	8565	8023	2703
Sales of commercial autos in USA (\$000,000s), 2000 adjusted	112,620	114,020	83,220

Source: GM Annual Reports.

at their workstations. Plant management would then eliminate jobs in that area, firing the now excess workers. In its first four months, GMAD eliminated 500 jobs (Garson, 1972: 69). America's largest corporation, in sum, first responded to global competition not through new techniques of control, but a return to despotism.

Contrary to the predictions of personnel specialists, the young new-hires rebelled against GMAD. Employees utilized traditional tactics such as filing grievance complaints with the union (5000 in GMAD's first five months); coordinated slow-downs and engaged in wildcat strikes; and even took extreme measures such as sabotaging the Vegas (Jermier et al., 1994). Workers' solidarity received extensive national publicity, becoming 'a metaphor for an entire generation's socio-political struggle' (Russo, 1998: 237), and 'one of the most publicized and discussed industrial events in American history' (Jermier, 1988: 110).

Aronowitz (1973: 37–9) and Moberg (1977: 459, 522) argued that worker resistance was facilitated by a sense that they were not economically dependent on GM: the average employee was a 24-year-old bachelor living at home with financial support from his parents. My interviewees concurred that workers at the time typically had 'something else going on' – a side business, a job prospect elsewhere – to fall back upon in case of a firing from the plant. The local steel industry, though declining, was frequently mentioned as an alternate source of employment. I asked one respondent: 'Were you worried about getting fired during the wildcat strikes in 1972?' He replied:

Nah. I hated the job so much and besides we were only making seven bucks an hour back then. A buddy of mine was working at [a local steel company] and he was on the lowest paying job. He was making 8.50 an hour...I was sure I could have gotten into a mill if I'd had to. (Tony P., 29 years seniority)

Regardless of whether the local labor market was in reality as vibrant as Tony portrays it, such financial fall-backs were evoked by workers then and now as providing a baseline of security in their struggles.

Inside the plant, resistance to GMAD was experienced and expressed in several ways. For the individual worker, it violated expectations of reasonable, dignified and safe work. Aronowitz (1973: 27) found that workers drew upon the traditions of the local steel industry – in which work was not routinized and

workers had autonomy – to critique GMAD’s despotism. Resistance was also gendered. A worker interviewed by Moberg, when asked ‘What makes you want to rebel?’ stated:

When [the foremen] come over and throw some more work on me, just to piss me off or see how far they can push me. If they come over and get me to do something extra, then they’ll just give me something more to do. ‘Cause I was sucker enough to take this...why shouldn’t they just add more work? Hey this guy’s a pansy.’ (1977: 205)

In turn, those who complied and performed extra work were feminized or accused of being homosexuals. ‘Company men’ gave ‘blow jobs to the foreman’, and had their ‘heads so deep up the foreman’s ass that if he turned a hard right they would break their nose’ (Moberg, 1977: 523) ‘GMAD’, in short, ‘was a threat to [workers’] sense of manhood. They had to resist or see themselves as “pansies”’ (1977: 295).

At the collective level, to resist work intensification was to express solidarity with co-workers; it was to prevent a union brother from being thrown out on the street:

I liked it before GMAD, the moral support... . We were all friends and when a friend gets laid off, you really get burned. We heard they cut the four guys installing the bumper down to three. We knew what was happening, we went into the hole [i.e. engaged in a slow-down action] on purpose so they wouldn’t lay people off. (Moberg, 1977: 201)

The Lordstown local union affiliate, UAW 1112, also at this time achieved national notoriety. Composed of young radicals, it would fall foul of the UAW International for informally sanctioning workers’ technically illegal tactics (Moberg, 1977: 105–10). In sum, resistance at Lordstown in the 1970s was supported by workers’ positions in kin networks and the local labor market, while the individual and collective levels of struggle were united on the shop floor.

Not only because of the bad press generated by GMAD, but also because the Vega flopped (the ‘revolutionary’ new car had the disconcerting tendency to catch fire during highway driving; by June 1972, 95% of all Vegas were recalled), GMAD was phased out by 1974 and the plant reconfigured to build a new small automobile, the J-Car (Rothschild, 1973: 86). While life on the shop floor settled into a pre-GMAD equilibrium, by the late 1970s corporate strategy for reducing its workforce shifted towards securing concessions from locals through threats of plant closings. As the whipsawing commenced, though, militancy at Lordstown resurfaced: workers and Local 1112 refused to grant concessions. Throughout the 1980s workers ousted union leaders who voiced support for concessions (Russo, 1998: 239). Lordstown was at the forefront of the national anti-concession movement within the UAW international, and voted overwhelmingly against local and national concessionary contracts in 1982 and 1984.

The 1990s: waging a war of attrition

Around 1990, requests for concessions eliminating jobs from the plant began winning acceptance from labor. Management, claiming to be in dire financial straits, would demand that workers allow outsourcing. Local 1112 would in turn draft and members ratify contracts permitting job elimination. The commencement of concessions, however, coincided with three developments that should have strengthened workers' capacity to oppose them. First, during the early 1990s Lordstown's J-Car emerged as one of the company's best-selling products. Workers regularly put in 70-hour weeks to meet a 425,000 car-per-year quota, ensuring steady and always-revered overtime pay (Ringler, 1996: 3). As GM earned record profits later in the decade (Phillips, 1998: 55), managerial threats based upon the popularity or profitability of the plant's product became less credible:

JS: There's a lot of talk in the area about the plant closing.

Clyde S. (29 years' seniority): We've been hearing that so many times over the years. It's just a *scare tactic* really.

Second, in 1987 Lordstown workers received, through national contract negotiations, lifetime job security from GM.⁷ In the event of a shutdown, workers hired before 1985 (the vast majority of those at Lordstown) must be offered a job at another plant or be paid their regular salary for the remainder of their working life. Workers were thus 'buffered' against threats of plant closings:

In [19]87 things changed drastically for us. It *took away a lot of the fear* because if they close the plant, and I know a lot of other guys felt this way, they have to move me somewhere else. So economically I'm no longer looking at GM closing this plant and I've invested 22 years and now I'm out on the street... . *A plant closing now would be more an inconvenience than a disaster.* (Kurt M., 22 years' seniority)

Third, workers espouse no faith in the efficacy of concessions for affecting corporate decisions regarding capital withdrawal.⁸ Even union leaders admit that concessions do not directly affect corporate decisions:

JS: These contracts, does management tell you that if they go through, they will promise not to close the plant?

1112 Official: Well no of course they don't promise to keep us open. I mean, these contracts are more a *gesture of good faith*.

In sum, the material, political and ideological bases of hegemonic despotism dissipated just as concession bargaining began. Management must now secure worker consent to concessionary outsourcing. To do so, the company engages in a prolonged though subtle 'war of attrition', in which requests for concessions eliminating jobs entail not hiring new workers, rather than firing current employees. In-depth interviews with workers reveal why such tactics of deindustrialization have proved effective in a time of corporate prosperity.

Veterans

Approximately 80 percent of current Lordstown workers were hired between 1966 and 1977. Their talk about concessions revealed a deep ambivalence, expressed most vividly in the extensive, self-effacing vocabulary used to discuss them:

Brian B. (26 years' seniority): Why did we trade 2000 jobs for 5000? Beats me. We're not gonna be here anyway. It's this damn attrit.

JS: Attrit?

Brian: Attrition. Die or retire.

JS: OK

Brian: We just eat it up, like we're happy to just *slowly bleed to death*.

JS: What do you think about when management asks for concessions from workers?

Scott W. (28 years' seniority): Personally, my committeeman told we would have to do that. If we don't, then they'll close our plant down...

JS: Do you think that's true?

Scott: Nah not really. But it's an *easy pill to swallow* (laughs)...

To understand why workers are content to 'slowly bleed to death', I explore three themes which arose repeatedly during the interviews: workers' changing experiences with the labor process, changing orientation to blue collar work, and opinions of the local union.

On the shop floor

In 1972, Lordstown workers struggled for a humane workload and stood in solidarity with co-workers targeted for retrenchment, resisting workforce reduction through work intensification and firing. These ideologies were recycled during the 1980s to denounce GM's attempts to reduce the workforce through involuntary layoffs. The company now, however, debundles demands for outsourcing from attempts to reconfigure the labor process or lay off active workers.

Veteran workers, armed with years of experience of collectively fighting managerial attempts to speed-up production, today experience considerable control over the labor process. Workers, that is, will act together to slowdown, work to rule or even take wildcat action. Kurt M., introduced earlier, describes a recent experience:

Recently our foreman tried to add work to a job, and so the guy went into slowdown mode. The foreman comes over and he's saying, 'what's the problem?' The guy says, 'I can't get the job done'. And the foreman's watching him and he sees that he's going slow and he says, 'I know you can do this job', and just stands there.

Well if I work ahead I can get my job done in 15 seconds. So if there's a gap it can be made up in my area. But I stretch it out and take my full 50 seconds. I increase the throughput, the time it's held in my area. So we all started to do that, to build

in station, and now we're shutting down the main line. Then they bring down engineers with stopwatches to stand there and watch the guy work... [How was this issue resolved?] They took the work back off. If the guy will call their bluffs and keep on doing this, it will get the work taken back off. And it helps the guy who's fighting the job because he looks around and says, ok everybody's breathing down my neck but I'm not alone on this.

The parallel between Kurt's account and that of the worker interviewed by Moberg above is striking in terms of the continuation of shop-floor solidarity to fight management to insure a reasonable work pace.

Working conditions at the plant have also improved since the 1970s. Notoriously bad jobs have been eliminated, while the most dangerous and straining elements of the average job have been improved through new ergonomic job design. Here, Brian B. describes the change over the years in his daily work tasks:

When I first got in they put me in the paint department. As a spray painter. It was the grittiest job I ever had...you put cold cream on your face, and rubber boots, and when you went into the spray booth you squirted oil on the floor because paint is sticky and that was so you could walk. And there's six or eight guys in this room spray painting and it's unbelievable. I come outta there, one side of my face is all gray from the paint and I figure I got to get outta there, ya know. I don't care what they say about it ain't gonna hurt you, it can't be any good for ya. (Brian B.)

When asked whether he felt that health and safety at the plant had improved, Brian replied:

Oh yeah. It's really improved. Not as physically damaging to your body as it used to be. I can remember before ergonomics really took hold. People going out of that plant every night, myself included, actually hurting and just the way the job used to be set up, baskets of materials that you had to bend down and dig stuff out of, stress on your back. Now we have stock racks that come up off the floor, they're set on scissor lifts and they're air controlled...I like it better this way. You still do the same amount of work, but it's easier on the person. (Brian B.)

In addition, because GM no longer fires anyone, workers are able to maintain a sense of solidarity with their 'working buddies' on the shop floor. The ideological critiques formed during past struggles, effective for fighting job degradation and worker firings, are ineffective against job reduction through attrition:

If GM lays off your buddy by making you do his work, then you bet we'll slow-down or wildcat. But if they don't hire anyone to replace him after he retires, well that's their right. After all it is their company. (Stuart D., 31 years' seniority)

Outside the factory

If not on the shop floor, should an ideology combating concessionary outsourcing exist outside the workplace? During the 1970s workers' struggles in the plant were facilitated by the financial independence afforded by their identities as

Table 3 Security and struggle at Lordstown

	<i>Shop floor</i>	<i>In community</i>
1972	<i>Ideology of struggle based on identity of 'working man' and 'union brother'.</i>	<i>Financial security because of status as bachelors with job prospects at local manufacturing and steel industries.</i>
2002	<i>Financial security because of lifetime job security agreement.</i>	<i>New ideology of struggle based on increased community integration and fight to preserve jobs?</i>

unattached bachelors with other job prospects. The tables have seemingly turned. For while workers' current shop-floor identities provide security (formalized in their lifetime job security) though no rationale for struggle, their current positions in the community would seem to provide exactly such an ideology. As Lordstown's workers have aged, they have married, had children and become increasingly integrated into the community (14 of my 15 veteran interviewees are or were married and have at least one child). Why have workers' new roles as parents, property owners and, for many, small business proprietors not led to a commitment to retaining unionized jobs at the plant, to secure the economic survival of the community? (See Table 3.) Such calls for community preservation on the part of current manufacturing workers were in fact well documented in early studies of plant closings (Dudley, 1994). Workers' life-trajectories, we will see, have led not simply to increasing integration with the local community but to relatively privileged positions within it; trajectories and positions they now seek to reproduce. These strategies lead to symbolic disavowals of manual work in everyday life outside of the plant and indifference to concessions at work.

Interviews with veteran Lordstown workers suggest they have pursued two 'paths' of upward mobility over the past 30 years. First, they have utilized unionized GM jobs to reproduce and increase their economic capital. One common strategy, documented as well by Chinoy (1955), is to invest autoworker wages in various entrepreneurial side projects, the most common of which is the small business:

Consider Jason T. preparing a transition from a self-described 'working stiff' to a white-collar professional. Ten years ago he finished his bachelors degree in economics at a local college, and took a side job as a financial advisor at the workers' credit union. Upon retiring at the young age of 48, he will invest his considerable savings into setting up his own financial consulting service for auto workers.

Strategies of economic accumulation have been facilitated by the surrounding area's economic depression. As employment opportunities have disappeared from this Rustbelt town (unemployment rates in the area are annually among the nation's highest, hitting 20–25%), the stable wages and benefits offered by a Lordstown job have increased in relative value. Lordstown jobs have in

essence been ‘nailed in place’ – tied to a wage structure set at the national level by the UAW and GM – while the rest of the local class structure has slid downward. Even in retirement workers remain financially secure because of the generous pensions they collect for the remainder of their lives.

Second, workers have endeavored to transform economic into cultural capital, especially educational degrees (Bourdieu, 1996: 3). This has taken place primarily through their ability to send their children to local private schools for primary and secondary educations, and then put them through post-secondary schooling – from community colleges to public state universities to out-of-state private colleges. So while I had expected workers to argue that Lordstown jobs should be saved to ensure manufacturing work for the community’s children, nearly all stated they would advise against seeking a manufacturing job. I asked Stuart D. what sort of job advice he would give to a young person:

I don’t see the auto industry as a bad thing as long as you’re not an assembler. If they went as engineers of some sort, I don’t think it’s a bad move. My regards to kids is to go to college, learn to work with your mind not just your hands. (Stuart D.)

Chuck C. explains the sacrifices he has made to send his kids to college:

I told my son, for the past 30 years I’ve hated every day getting up and going to work... . But I tell him, I did this so you don’t have to. Go to college, do something you like. Life’s too short to put with up all that crap on the [assembly] line.

The above quote demonstrates as well that it is only by taking as our unit of analysis not the individual worker, but his place in an intergenerational family structure that we can understand the seemingly paradoxical refusal to mobilize against concessions, as well as the lack of mourning for the loss of manufacturing jobs from the community.

Opinion of union

While workers vote for concessionary contracts, local union officials must actively negotiate them in the first place. While the interviews do not allow claims concerning the direct motivations of union officials, they do convey workers’ deep alienation from and cynicism toward their delegated representatives.

Interviewees stated repeatedly that the caucus in control of UAW Local 1112 for the past decade identifies with management, on the shop floor as well as in their negotiations with the company.

JS: Do you ever file grievances?

Jason T: Not anymore, they’re just a *waste of paper*. You put in a call and your rep comes down and goes right over to the foreman, not you. And you’re the one who’s right and you’re who he’s supposed to be representing!

An illustrating case occurred during my first research trip to Lordstown. In November 1999, GM and local UAW officials negotiated an attritionary contract

reducing the workforce from 4500 to 3400 through outsourcing various sub-assembly and support jobs. Unlike other recent contracts, this one also proposed a change in the rate system at the plant, which would serve to cut down on workers' idle time and relief breaks. These proposals caused, in the words of one respondent, 'quite a stink'. On 25 November, workers voted down this concessionary agreement by a two-to-one margin (Ringler, 1999a). Union officials responded by chastizing the membership at a hastily called meeting, surveying workers concerning their objections, and re-writing the contract. In the revote three weeks later it narrowly passed (Ringler, 1999b). While the revised contract still outsourced over a thousand jobs, alterations in the fine print – including the withdrawal of proposals for increasing the line speed – may explain its passage the second time around. Nevertheless, it is telling that three of my interviewees accused the union of rigging the second election to insure a yes-vote.

But if this were true, why would union officials do such a thing? Nearly all of my respondents believed that despite an official freeze on hiring at the plant, pro-concession union officials are granted access to a controversial job-exchange system controlled by plant managers. In return for supporting concessions, a union official receives a signed job application to be passed on to whomever he wishes.⁹ The veracity of workers' charges of union corruption cannot here be verified, and it must be emphasized that workers' beliefs are reported only as 'social facts' whose effects are real regardless of the truth underlying the claims (Durkheim, 1982: 50). They reveal, that is, a deep schism between workers and their delegated representatives.

Young workers

Veteran workers' hostility towards the union is expressed in their attitudes toward young workers. Having 'gotten in' through a union sponsor, new-hires are despised as embodied extensions of the union itself. Julie S., hired at Lordstown in 1997, describes the welcome she received from co-workers on her first day at the plant: 'All they really say to you is, "Who's your dad, who got you in here?" It got on my nerves so much at first you know, but after a while you realize there are a lot of their kids in there.' Danny G., a 27-year veteran, believes his co-workers support concessions to spite young workers:

One thing has to do with screwing the young kids out there who got in through the union. These guys've been tryin' for years to get their own people in and would rather sign a lousy contract than let those jobs keep going to union kids.

But how do young workers feel about life on the factory line, and concessionary outsourcing? Unlike their counterparts during the 1972 conflict, they have articulated no ideological critiques of corporate attempts to withdraw work. For unlike veterans, guaranteed lifetime employment, young workers lack job security. If the plant should close they would receive no severance nor be offered employment elsewhere with the corporation. Yet the general model of the effect

of job insecurity on workers' capacity to organize is but half the story. Indeed, today's young workers – especially in comparison with those in the 1970s – voice neither dejection nor hostility towards GM, but rather a sense of empowerment and identification with the company. (In 1972 Barbara Garson found that young Lordstown workers took pride in *not* owning a Vega – or any GM car. In contrast, all of my young respondents proudly drive new GM automobiles.)

To account for this active component of worker consent, we may compare the typical life trajectories of young workers today with those of veteran workers. In 1972, new-hires were primarily white men from established blue-collar families embedded in local steel industries; insofar as their fathers and grandfathers had labored in plants and mills, an industrial job was considered both a right and a rite of passage. Today's young workers, in contrast, came of age in the heart of the Rust Belt. They have seen family members and friends laid off, downsized and search fruitlessly for work. For them, a job offer from GM is experienced as nothing less than a 'social miracle'. After handing in their initial application to GM, many spent years awaiting 'the call' from personnel and can pinpoint the exact moment it came. This sense of salvation, of being one of the chosen few, extends beyond the moment of hiring. Among their peer group of young people in the region, employment at GM is a holy grail, an opportunity to convert newfound economic capital into middle-class status (especially through the purchase – usually on credit – of consumer goods such as cars and houses):

For Julie, a 25-year-old worker raised in a single-parent family, a Lordstown job meant that she and her new husband could buy a house on the 'rich side' of town. Roger, a 24-year-old African-American, moved out of his parents' home upon getting into Lordstown. He now entertains his friends nightly in his two-story, lavishly furnished apartment.

Second, whereas for the new-hire in the 1970s the fast pace of the assembly line coupled with GMAD's despotism contradicted understandings of humane work, young interviewees' job histories consisted primarily of part-time jobs in fast-food and retail outlets, work they considered underpaid and demeaning. Assembly work at the modern auto plant, especially considering the high pay, is in contrast rather easy.

A lot of days, after four hours maybe you've made your quota or there's a problem somewhere on the line. So you're done at lunch and you do what you want... . There's a track outside where you can run. There's a gym upstairs where you can work out. Or I can go in the locker room and I have a lounge chair I pull out and go to sleep. I can't believe I'm saying all this on there [on the tape]! I have a blanket and a pillow I keep in my locker. But usually I just sit around with friends and play cards, talk. (Melissa B., four years' seniority)

I make 150 bucks a day for about six hours of actual work; half the time we're goofing off. And with that type of money you can live real comfortable around here... . Yeah I'm happy at Lordstown. (Joey P., three years' seniority)

In sum, for today's young workers, the initial hire at GM represents immediate upward mobility. Living in a post-industrial economy without post-secondary degrees, they owe their social existence and sense of self to the plant and, by extension, to GM. (Tellingly, none of my interviewees has alternative plans in the event the plant would close.) Consent to concessions is thus as much a product of active identification with the company engendered by a sense of indebtedness to the plant and corporation:

JS: So management right now wants to cut the workforce out there in half to put you in competition for a new product.

Roger S.: Well those jobs, they're just something we have to give to keep the plant open. I mean, two or three thousand jobs is better than none!

Conclusion

Labour relations between GM and its industrial partner/nemesis, the UAW, have served as a model and trendsetter for industrial relations in America generally. The generous contracts negotiated between the two parties during the mid-20th century were prime examples of the hegemonic labor compromises characteristic of monopoly capitalism. Autoworkers received generous benefits and freedom from despotic discipline in exchange for the uninterrupted production required by Fordism. With the onset of global competition GM opted out of this labor accord and after an unsuccessful experiment with despotism at Lordstown, used threats of plant shutdowns to win concessions. The UAW, however, failed to coordinate a united front to hegemonic despotism, focusing instead upon negotiating severance packages and job security for current workers.

On a cursory look this model of post-industrial politics fits contemporary labor relations at Lordstown. The company claims financial hardship, plant management asks labor to allow outsourcing, the union negotiates and workers approve concessions. At Lordstown, however, concessionary bargaining approximates theatre more than actual whipsawing. While hegemonic despotism relies upon worker vulnerability and credible threats of closure, we find at Lordstown the opposite: worker security and scepticism.

Concessionary bargaining at Lordstown was thus labeled despotic hegemony, for it relies upon actively securing labor's consent to the elimination of jobs. While plant shutdowns and whipsawing are the quickest methods of transferring production from high-wage, unionized sites, they are best suited for periods of economic recession, in line with discourses of firm survival.¹⁰ Otherwise, such tactics may generate resistance from labor and community groups, precipitate attempts by the state to regulate corporate actions, and create considerable bad press. Eliminating jobs through attritionary outsourcing is a costlier and lengthier process. At Lordstown, though, it has accomplished the same purpose as a plant shutdown in a period of corporate prosperity and with

minimal resistance from workers. It is an alternative, complementary strategy of deindustrialization perfectly suited for a logic of relative profitability and for maintaining the appearance of good corporate citizenship.

Having specified the structural conditions under which capital can deindustrialize through despotic hegemony, this article elucidated three aspects of this labor regime at Lordstown. First, an improvement of working conditions and increased worker control over the labor process, which preserve shop-floor solidarity though offer no basis for fighting job reduction through attrition. Second, a severing of workers from their union, manifested in a widespread distrust of local union leaders. Third, a symbolic disavowal of manual labor by today's veteran workers; coupled with an active identification with the company on the part of young workers. This study thus placed at the center of analysis the active ideological and symbolic processes involved in the process of manufacturing concessions.

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Notes

- 1 Empirical evidence that the strength of labor is the most important factor affecting corporate decisions to invest in new production facilities in the USA is provided by Grant and Hutchinson (1996), Grant and Wallace (1994), Romo and Schwartz (1995), and Jaffee (1986).
- 2 The UAW represents workers throughout the American auto industry.
- 3 This Maslowian assumption is usually implicit in the literature though occasionally specified in detail: 'Insecurity acts directly on those it touches (and whom it renders incapable of mobilizing themselves) and indirectly on all the others, through the fear it arouses...[It is] the perquisites for an increasingly 'successful' exploitation of these *submissive dispositions produced by insecurity*' (Bourdieu 1998: 82–3, emphasis added).
- 4 By the late 1980s US politicians publicly questioned the motives of auto manufacturers who continued to relocate offshore as the economy recovered (Phillips, 1998). By 1992 industry publications would advise auto executives that given the bad press surrounding shutdowns, 'keeping a low profile makes political sense – on both sides of the border' (Baker et al., 1992: 103).
- 5 By 1989 30 states had introduced legislation intended to regulate shutdowns, and the US Congress in 1988 passed the WARN Act (Worker Adjustment, Retraining, and Notification), mandating that companies must give workers advance notice of a plant closing.
- 6 When the Lordstown plant opened in 1966, GM hired only men to fill the initial 2000 jobs. They continued to hire only men until 1970, after which they

- greatly reduced hiring overall. Thus even today the plant's workforce is 86 per cent male.
- 7 Paragraph 96 of the UAW–GM national agreement.
 - 8 The same conclusion was reached in a comprehensive study of plant closings across the USA between 1970 and 1985: labor's willingness to grant concessions had no effect on corporate decisions to move production out of a community (Grant and Wallace, 1994: 57).
 - 9 One respondent stated that union officials and mid-level managers control the distribution of these. The possibility of such transactions gives an interesting twist to Gramsci's classic description of union officials as 'bankers of men in a monopoly system' (1977: 77).
 - 10 Indeed, while this paper has argued that the 1990s witnessed the emergence of despotic hegemony as GM's primary strategy for reducing its unionized workforce, it is not the case that hegemonic despotism has been rendered obsolete. As the US auto industry's decade long boom slowed in 2000, GM announced a new wave of plant closings and demands for concessions. At GM Vauxhall-Luton (UK), a series of concessions were unsuccessful in forestalling the December 2000 announcement of a plant closure. As opposed to the slow process of attritionary outsourcing at Lordstown, Luton witnessed widespread worker resistance including an occupation of plant management offices and a strike.

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