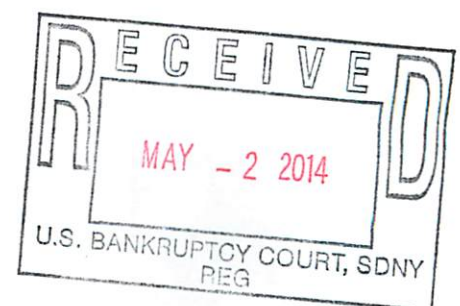


We are line workers at a GM facility. The enclosed has been sent to every government agency we can think of and thought we would send one to you also. We are of the belief that if the production of any commodity necessitates the sacrifice of human life, society should do without that commodity. But so far our appeals have fallen on deaf ears. Believing themselves of superior essence they assume the right to exploit those beneath them.

But we hold out hope that someone will do not what is legal but what is right. The crimes of this organization have become so brazen that even the blind can see them.

Wish you well in your struggle against the forces of darkness.

Friends of Nick.



ABOUT LINKS CLASSIFIEDS

Man Commits Suicide at Flint's GM Truck Assembly Plant

FLINT, MI – Production was shut down today at Flint's GM Truck Assembly Plant when an employee took his own life around 2:30 this afternoon. The plant is located at G-3100 Vanslyke Road, Flint, MI. The front door to the plant was blocked by crime scene tape at 2:45pm.

From what MI Headlines has been able to learn from commentary of those who knew this individual, he was a line production employee who was distraught over the breakup of a relationship that he had been involved in. Those who knew him have said that about 20 minutes before he took his life, he posted on Facebook his reasoning for doing so. Oddly enough, some wondered or speculated about how General Motors may have played a part in his death.

Flint Police confirm a gun was used but there were no other injuries and no other shots fired.



In a statement, GM said, "Tragically, an employee at GM's Assembly plant in Flint, Michigan took his life this afternoon. No one else in the plant was injured. We're working with local authorities as the incident is investigated. Our condolences and deepest sympathies go to the employee's family and colleagues."

Production resumed at the plant starting with the second shift at 5:30 p.m. and third shift was told to report to work Tuesday night. The individual's name has not been released at this time.

If you or someone you know is contemplating suicide, **there is help available**. Please look into that before taking any steps that cannot be reversed.

Share this:

Facebook 5

Twitter 7

Google

StumbleUpon

Digg

Tumblr

Pinterest

Reddit

Email

Print

Comments

0 comments



Add a comment...

Comment using...

Facebook social plugin

BOLD
OPINIONS
FOR
NEWSPAPERS
AND
NEW MEDIA

Please support OtherWords

Newsletter Sign-up
Email Address
Zip Code

Home About us Syndicate Archive Partners Submissions Donate
Peace / Security Environment / Health Economy / Business Rights / Democracy Food / Farming
Print RSS Share

Rights / Democracy

SEPTEMBER 17, 2012

OP-ED, 576 WORDS

Disabled on the Job, Fired without Severance or Benefits

A GM subsidiary is providing an unlikely test for the U.S.-Colombia trade deal's labor provisions.

By Jess Hunter-Bowman



Jorge Parra, a welder at General Motors' South American Colmotores subsidiary, performed manual labor at an assembly plant near Bogotá until he was disabled. The Colombian underwent three surgeries and now walks with a cane and has several screws in his spine. GM fired him when he could no longer work due to his repetitive strain injuries. He wound up with no medical benefits or severance pay.

"My life has been left in ruins by GM. I was fired due to workplace injuries," Parra says. "The company lied about the reason for my dismissal."

Parra formed an association of injured GM workers along with another 67 people. He estimates at least 200 workers have been fired from the plant due to workplace injuries. Along with another nine former GM autoworkers, he began a hunger strike on Labor Day. They are demanding GM compensate them for their disabling injuries.

Colombia, one of our newest free-trade partners, has a long history of labor rights violations. In fact, President Barack Obama and Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos agreed to a Labor Action Plan designed to improve Colombia's labor practices. The hope was that the plan would assuage congressional concerns about continued violations and ensure passage of a U.S.-Colombia trade deal.



Andrea_44/Flickr

Colombia has long been the most dangerous country in the world for union members. And those killers face little risk of prosecution. An estimated 3,000 labor leaders have been murdered since 1986 and a conviction has only been reached in approximately 10 percent of those cases.

The U.S.-Colombia Labor Action Plan alleviated the concerns of enough Democrats to get the trade deal passed a year ago, but the dangerous climate workers face in the South American country hasn't improved. In fact, 34 trade unionists have been killed and another 485 have faced death threats since Obama and Santos signed the plan in April 2011.

MORE

View more in Rights / Democracy:

- Billionaires Score Big Win with McCutcheon Decision
- Tech Titans Must Do More than Criticize NSA Snooping
- I Think They Can
- Good News and Bad News about News Eavesdropping and Snooping for All
- Hobby Lobby, Quit Your Needling

RELATED TAGS

- advertising california campaign
- finance Citizens United civil rights
- Congress edward snowden
- elections football GOP
- immigration Inequality
- internet latinos LGBT Martin Luther King Jr.
- media Media Reform national security
- agency politics poverty prison industrial
- complex prisons racism regulation
- Religion reproductive rights Russia
- social safety net sotu sports
- Supreme Court Surveillance tea party telecommunications television
- Terrorism Texas voter suppression
- Women's Rights

REPRINT THIS ARTICLE

OtherWords offers our content free-of-charge under a "Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivatives Work" license.

View more info »

Surprisingly, a simple case of wrongful firing like Parra's at a GM assembly plant, rather than the murder of union organizers, has become a litmus test of sorts for the Labor Action Plan.

In GM's Bogota assembly plant, when workers got injured on the job the sinister plot unfolded. GM fired Parra and other workers without offering any continuing health care coverage, severance, or other benefits. The Colombian government's labor inspector then signed off on the firings and the workers' compensation insurance company covering the employees altered medical records to suggest injuries were commonplace, rather than work-related.

The labor inspector has since been suspended and the insurance company was fined, but GM has yet to either reinstate the workers in new positions or offer them fair compensation. And the Colombian government certainly isn't pressuring them to do so.

Share This relatively straightforward case has become the test of Colombia's post-trade agreement commitment to workers' rights. There's no need to arrest or prosecute any terrorist gunmen responsible for killing union leaders. The only question is whether Colombia's Labor Ministry and courts can hold a subsidiary of a Big Three U.S. automaker accountable for firing workers disabled through workplace injuries.

If the answer is no, there's little chance Colombia will clean up its labor rights record in more serious and challenging areas, such as union murders and subcontracting.

And without labor rights progress, the Obama administration's Hail Mary pass to get congressional support on the Colombia trade deal — the Labor Action Plan — will be remembered as a two-bit magic trick.

Jess Hunter-Bowman is Associate Director of Witness for Peace, a nonprofit organization with a 30-year history analyzing U.S. economic and military policy in Latin America. WitnessforPeace.org
Distributed via OtherWords (OtherWords.org)

Tagged: automakers, colombia, Free Trade, Labor Rights

49 3 &+1 0 1 101

ALSO FEATURED IN
YubaNet
Sep 18, 2012

RELATED ARTICLES



Big Bad Free Trade Accord



The Corporate Court's War on Women



Supremely High Stakes in This Election



Jobs or the Environment?



Promoting Unemployment

Supporters of fired Colombian workers confront GM

By [Martha Grevatt](http://www.workers.org/articles/author/martha-grevatt/) on June 16, 2013

Detroit — For nearly two years members of Asotrecol — the Association of Injured Workers and Ex-workers of General Motors Colmotores — have been living in tents outside the U.S.

Embassy in Bogotá, Colombia. They are still demanding justice for workers who were fired after they were in the job in GM's Colombian plant. After they were fired, GM der their injuries were work-related, making them ineligible for work compensation.

From September 2012 until March of this year, Asotrecol Presi Parra resided in Detroit, trying in vain to meet with GM executi resolve the situation. When he returned to Colombia, his many supporters here vowed to continue to work in solidarity with As

On June 6, a group of activists, most of them rank-and-file unic members, demonstrated outside GM world headquarters here GM's annual shareholder meeting. Huge letters on poster board out a message that could not be clearer: "GM: workers are not



http://i0.wp.com/www.workers.org/content/uploads/2013/06/gm_colo

Protest in Detroit at General Motors shareholder meeting in solidarity with Colombian GM workers.
Photo: Frank Hammer

disposable.” The protest received many honks of support and widespread media coverage.

Asotrecol sent the following message to the protest:

“Dear Compañeros,

“It is a great great joy for us to know that we can count on and support, to know that even though our countries are so by far distances, we are united by the same needs and the dreams of a world that is more just.

“We want to let you know that we have been camped in front of the U.S. Embassy for 674 days, 22 months now, in a permanent occupation that has involved many tough days, as you can understand, with many dreams and hopes. Our fellow workers currently inside GM Colmotores enjoy great benefits from what we have been able to achieve together, and your role from the beginning has been key in this struggle.

“GM in Colombia has begun to make big changes that would be impossible to imagine if not for our struggle based on our firm conviction of enforcing our rights. Today we are hopeful that the U.S. Embassy in Colombia will fulfill the commitment it has made to intervene very soon.

“Today more than ever, we beseech you brothers and sisters, workers in the U.S., to help us maintain the pressure through these beautiful protests and expressions of support, like to be there are ultimately our only weapon of pressure and justice in going to do right.

“Compañeros, beyond that, we wish to express, in our name and that of our families, our deepest thanks and infinite admiration for your solidarity and the affection that you have always shown us. Bless you all, brothers and sisters.

“Fraternally, Asotrecol — SOLIDARITY HAS NO BORDERS”

Colombian GM workers sew their lips shut

By [Martha Grevatt](http://www.workers.org/articles/author/martagrevatt/) (<http://www.workers.org/articles/author/martagrevatt/>) on February 18, 2014

On the 77th anniversary of the Flint, Mich., sit-down strike in the U.S., fired GM workers in Colombia accelerate their struggle

After 930-plus days of occupation outside the U.S. Embassy in Bogota, Colombia, injured workers fired by General Motors are stepping up their fight for basic justice.

Day 925 came on Feb. 11, the 77th anniversary of the United Auto Workers' victory in the Flint sit-down strike. The Colombian workers chose that day to restart the hunger strike which has continued on and off since Aug. 1, 2012. Two members of the Association of Injured Workers and Ex-Workers Colmotores (Asotrecol) — Carlos Trujillo and the group's president Jorge Parra — dramatically demonstrated their commitment to by sewing their lips shut.



(<http://i0.wp.com/www.workers.org/content/uploads/2013/01/JorgeP>

Jorge Parra outside the Detroit auto show, Já
WW photo: David Sole

Since the beginning of the occupation, the workers have demanded that GM fulfill its legal obligation to place them in jobs they can perform despite their injuries. If they cannot work, GM is obligated to provide them with lifetime income. GM has gotten around the law, they say, by forging medical records to make the injuries appear not related.

Colombia is the most dangerous country in the world for union members. Nevertheless, Asotrecol has accomplished much through this struggle. Parra explained in a letter to UAW President Bob King:

Still waiting for justice

"We were able to force an end to the illegal collaboration between the GM Medical Department and the private healthcare service (Eli) operating inside the plant. ... GM has invested millions of dollars in ergonomic improvements on the production line, we have forced them to stop the dismissal of injured workers, and there has been a 50 percent increase in the number of injured workers who have been relocated to jobs more appropriate for their physical state. ... Our compañeros still working inside the plant have helped their fellow workers realize the importance of going to the doctor to get treated without fearing reprisals from GM, so that they avoid exacerbating their injuries.

"With great courage they have also started a new union, Sintra. The existing union, Sintraime, has been supported and strengthened by Asotrecol standing up to GM, after having nearly been decimated for years by devastating laws quite similar to the ones that are exported to the United States" — so-called "right to work" (for less) laws.

Eight fired workers, who have kept the fight going under the real dangers of a 30-month occupation, still wait for justice. GM refuses to negotiate a resolution of their issues. They struggle to feed their families. Two of those who have not lost their homes are facing foreclosure. Fundraising efforts, with thousands donated by rank-and-file auto workers, have kept the occupation going. Unfortunately, UAW President Bob King has distanced himself from Asotrecol, hence Parra's appeal.

New forces are rallying to Asotrecol's side. After the hunger strike the Colombian United Confederation of Workers donated food for Asotrecol families. Justice for Colombia, which "has the support of more than 7 million workers in the British and Irish trade union movements as well as over 80 MPs in the UK Parliament," stated "expresses its solidarity with Asotrecol."

To assist Asotrecol or watch an hour-long documentary about the struggle, visit Asotrecol.org.

Like Tweet (#)05(#)

Also see:

1. [Supporters of fired Colombian workers confront GM](http://www.workers.org/articles/2013/06/16/supporters-of-fired-colombian-workers-confront-gm/)
(<http://www.workers.org/articles/2013/06/16/supporters-of-fired-colombian-workers-confront-gm/>)
2. [Fired GM workers in Colombia determined to win](http://www.workers.org/articles/2013/09/12/fired-gm-workers-colombia-determined-win/)
(<http://www.workers.org/articles/2013/09/12/fired-gm-workers-colombia-determined-win/>)
3. [Autoworkers, community activists demand 'people's recovery'](http://www.workers.org/articles/2014/01/17/autoworkers-community-activists-demand-peoples-recovery/)(<http://www.workers.org/articles/2014/01/17/autoworkers-community-activists-demand-peoples-recovery/>)
4. [With one-day strike for \\$15 an hour, fast-food workers shut it](http://www.workers.org/articles/2013/09/05/one-day-strike-1-fast-food-workers-shut/)
(<http://www.workers.org/articles/2013/09/05/one-day-strike-1-fast-food-workers-shut/>)

Articles copyright 1995-2014 Workers World. Verbatim copying and distribution is permitted

< [Previous](#) [Next](#) >

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1990 - VOLUME 11 - NUMBERS 1 AND 2

AUTO INDUSTRY

Management by Stress

by Jane Slaughter

The "Team Concept" --a new model of labor relations imported from Japan--has captured the imagination of U.S. auto executives, and for good reason. It promises to improve productivity and quality and to banish the union to the sidelines of the shop floor. In many plants it is already delivering on that promise--and nowhere more efficiently than in the seven Japanese "transplants" which now provide 8 percent of the assembly capacity of the U.S. industry. Some version of team concept is used in at least half of General Motors' assembly plants, six Chrysler plants and two of Ford's. Additionally, each of the "Big Three" automakers is involved in a joint venture with (or part ownership of) a Japanese auto company which uses the team concept in its most advanced form.

The business press and even the popular media have been aglow with the promise of the team concept, praising such agreements as "progressive labor contracts" and "new industrial relations." On the surface, few could object to teamwork.

The use of the term "team concept" is less straightforward than it initially seems, however. In Japan, where the system was first developed, "teams" themselves are rarely referred to. The "team" verbiage was added as a sweetener by American personnel executives to help sell the plan to their workers. In fact, the teams actually used in the plants have little in common with our usual idea of a team, i.e., a unit of specialists in which each member makes a unique contribution to a group effort--pitcher, shortstop, outfielder. No one team member is expected to play all positions. In contrast, the teams in auto plants are made up of interchangeable workers, each adaptable enough to grant management maximum flexibility. Such teams have more in common with a team of horses--equal beasts of burden yoked together to pull for a common end (determined by the person holding the whip).

The team concept has the following characteristics: 1) The workforce is divided into teams of between four and 20 workers who elect a leader and hold meetings to discuss workplace problems (in some plants the team leader, who is also a union member, is appointed by management); 2) One of its main goals is to increase management flexibility by abolishing or drastically reducing the number

of job classifications; 3) Workers are to learn and perform more tasks than in a traditional plant. These two elements mean that the number of jobs can be cut considerably; 4) Workers are expected to take more interest in and responsibility for their jobs; and 5) There is to be a new spirit of harmony between local union and management as both join in a common effort to make their particular plant "competitive."

The leadership of the United Auto Workers (UAW) has welcomed team concept, reasoning that it offers a chance to preserve its members' jobs, and has unabashedly cooperated with the auto companies.

But team concept has been received more negatively among rank and file unionists. Team concept and the idea of "jointness" which underlies it are giving rise to an opposition trend in the UAW, called the New Directions Movement. At a January 1989 conference near Detroit attended by 900 UAW members, speaker after speaker rose to denounce team concept. "There's a new word for concessions, and it's 'team concept,'" said one worker from General Motors' Poletown plant. At an October 1989 New Directions conference, auto workers passed a resolution calling team concept "a managerial device which encourages competition between workers in order to eliminate jobs, weaken solidarity and help develop anti-union attitudes."

Fundamentally, team concept is a managerial strategy designed to increase productivity. It has more to do with changing union- management relations than with changing technology. Most team- concept plants use the traditional moving assembly line, and they vary widely in the use of fancy technology. Equally important is that, although the system was first perfected in Japan, it does not require the particularities of Japanese culture in order to function.

NUMMI

The best known team-concept plant is the joint venture of GM and Toyota in Fremont, California: New United Motors Manufacturing, Inc. (NUMMI). It is the most efficient plant in the GM system and has been the site of more pilgrimages by eager managers from all industries than any other factory in the country.

NUMMI builds the Toyota Corolla and the Geo Prizm and is famous for consistently high quality ratings and dramatic productivity gains. NUMMI rated very highly in a 1986 Massachusetts Institute of Technology study, for example, and workers' productivity there is at least 50 percent higher than other GM plants and nearly as high as a Japanese Toyota plant.

NUMMI made U.S. managers take notice because it accomplished these feats in an old plant, without a heavy input of new technology, and using the same workers that had formerly worked in the plant for GM (though many fewer of them). In 1982, before the introduction of the team concept, "thousands of

grievances were pending, drugs and alcohol were available for purchase throughout the plant, both partners [management and labor] seemed less concerned with quality than struggling over turf, productivity was low and product quality was so-so," according to NUMMI spokesperson Michael Damer. Following a two-year shutdown and a switch to the team concept, the plant has become known for high productivity, cooperation and low absenteeism. And all of this was accomplished without a confrontation with the union. Indeed, local and national union leaders are some of the biggest boosters of NUMMI. Critics of the local leadership refer to local President Tony De Jesus as "the tour guide."

To management, the NUMMI experiment "has been a very successful one," says GM spokesperson Jack Hanard. Its lessons are clear. You can take an American UAW workforce and an ordinary factory and, in two years, by changing the management, cowing the union and instituting the team concept, achieve productivity and quality competitive with Japanese companies.

The management-by-stress system

The changes in management and the union contract allowed the implementation of a total system often called "synchronous manufacturing," but more fully described by the term "management by stress." Management by stress is the most sophisticated version of team concept, even though it contradicts many traditional notions of good management.

According to conventional managerial wisdom, companies want extra parts and extra workers on hand to cover for any glitches that may arise. The goal is never to allow a breakdown to halt production. The management-by-stress system stretches the whole production system--workers, the supplier network, managers--like a rubber band to the point of breaking. Using the "just-in-time" inventory system, components are delivered only as they are needed--often directly from supplier plant to the moving assembly line. There are no banks of extra parts or readily available replacements for absent workers. Breakdowns in production are thus inevitable--but they are welcomed. A breakdown reveals a weak point--is a worker's tool designed poorly? should a supplier be subjected to more pressure to deliver promptly? Such weak points can then be corrected, creating a stronger system than before.

The device which best illustrates management by stress is *andon*. This Japanese term refers to a system of visual display boards placed above the assembly line throughout the plant. For purposes of illustration, imagine an *andon* board which shows each worker station with one of three lights: a green light indicates there are no problems; a yellow light shows that the operator is having trouble keeping up and needs help; and a red light means there is a problem which requires stopping the line.

The yellow light flashes when the operator pulls a cord. If the operator does not

pull the cord again within a fixed interval, say 30 seconds, the red light comes on and the line stops. In the traditional U.S. manufacturing operation, management would want to see nothing but green lights. Engineers would design enough slack into machinery, operations and labor power so that the plant could always operate in the green.

But under management by stress, "all green" is undesirable. It means that the system is not running as fast or efficiently as it might. It is far preferable to have yellow lights flashing fairly frequently, indicating that the workers, and the system as a whole, are being stretched to their limits.

Once the system has been fine-tuned, it can be further stressed by increasing the line speed or cutting the number of workers. Resources can be taken away from stations which are always green. The ideal state is achieved when the plant is running with all stations just on the line between green and yellow.

The idea that the system is in some sense self-balancing and ever improving has great appeal to the engineer or technocrat, particularly after seeing years of waste and mismanagement in traditional factories. The opportunity for tighter control is obvious. The problem is that most of this control is exerted over human beings.

Taylorism and speedup

The media has portrayed the team concept as a humanistic alternative to the supposedly outmoded ideas of "scientific management" originated early in this century by Frederick W. Taylor. Taylor is known as the father of the time-and-motion study; generations of auto workers have worked under the supposedly scientific eye of "the time-study expert" with a stopwatch, who timed their movements and attempted to reduce each job to a series of simple motions.

In fact, under management by stress, the tendency is to specify every move a worker makes in far greater detail than ever before. Management by stress intensifies regimentation and uniformity, producing a kind of super-Taylorism. Managers attempt to ensure that the "takt" time--the time the vehicle is at each work station--equals the "cycle time"--the time it takes an individual worker to complete a job.

Every motion is carefully measured. At NUMMI a worker is told when to move a left hand, how long it must take to pick up a tool, how many steps to take to the car and so on until 55 to 60 seconds of motion per minute are specified.

With this "standardized work," jobs are to be done in precisely the same way every time, by every worker. The worker may not change the way a job is done without permission. If the worker does find a way to shave off a few seconds, the worker must tell the foreman (now called a "group leader"). Management appropriates the shortcuts and periodically "rebalances" the jobs, rewriting job

descriptions so that no worker has a break. One Nissan worker in Tennessee called the jobs in his plant "eight-hour aerobics." No matter how well the worker learns a job, there is always room for kaizen (the Japanese word for continuous improvement). The worst aspect of this regimentation, for the worker, is that there is no chance to "work up the line," i.e. work faster for a short time in order to obtain a breathing spell later. The work pace is continuous and unvarying.

One of the hallmarks of old-style Taylorism was the removal of brainwork from the shop floor--all new ideas were to come from the engineers. Management by stress differs in that it seeks to make workers continually share their thoughts about the production process. At GM's Shreveport, Louisiana truck plant, for example, at model change time each team elects a "planner." The planner works not only with plant engineers but with the team itself to redesign--and eliminate--jobs.

In theory, the payoff for workers' increased effort and input is what management calls "multiskilling"--a worker learns all the jobs in a team instead of just one. The "skills" involved in these jobs, however, are broken down into such tiny tasks and are so job-specific that workers do not really become more skilled than before. They are more useful to management--more "flexible"--but they have not gained any marketable skills.

The elimination of all excess workers means the team members all have full jobs; there is no chance of helping another worker out when you can barely keep up with your own job. The hourly team leader helps the team members out when they fall behind, allows them to take bathroom breaks, keeps them supplied with equipment and runs errands for the group leader.

At NUMMI and other management-by-stress plants, there are no extra workers hired as absentee replacements. (Most Big Three team-concept plants have not yet adopted this policy.) Absent members are replaced by the team leader. If team members then need relief or help, they must depend on the group leader (who supervises two to four teams) or go without.

All the difficulties resulting from one worker's absence fall on those who are in daily contact with the absentee--his coworkers and immediate supervisors. The problems are not shifted upstairs by having the personnel department hire a "redundant" workforce to cover for absenteeism. As a result, workers tend to resent the absentee who, within the assumptions of the system, is the cause of the problem. In addition to the peer pressure, there are heavy penalties for absences. NUMMI managers claim that unscheduled absenteeism has dropped to around 2 percent, compared with nearly 9 percent for GM as a whole.

Stopping the line

"Workers can stop the line" is the most prominent feature symbolizing the

difference between the team concept and the old methods of management. At NUMMI, "workers are allowed and encouraged to stop the production process if there is a problem," says NUMMI's Damer. The companies present this power as proof of their respect for the workers' humanity. "It is not a conveyor that operates men," says the Toyota production manual used at NUMMI, "it is men that operate a conveyor."

The right to stop the line is supposedly a substitute for union-negotiated production standards. In traditional plants, industrial engineers define which tasks each job entails, but once the standards are established, they cannot be changed arbitrarily. The union has the right to grieve work standards and even to strike over them during the life of the contract.

In management-by-stress plants, on the other hand, group leaders may change a job at any time, and there is no right to strike. Team-concept proponents argue that there is no need for the old, cumbersome procedures. If the worker is making a genuine attempt but cannot keep up, all the worker has to do is pull the stop cord. There is no penalty.

In practice, however, workers have found that management in team-concept plants is no more fond of an idle line (which equals lost production) than in traditional plants. It's the yellow *andon* lights they want to see, not the red ones. At GM's Van Nuys, California plant, for example, workers were repeatedly assured during team-concept training that they could and should stop the line if they ran into a problem. Workers took this seriously; some team leaders stopped the line when management ignored their requests for more workers. The plant manager put out a letter to employees explaining that too many line stops were putting the plant behind its production schedule; a large part of team meetings were spent going over when it was acceptable to stop the line.

As the line is sped up and the whole system stressed, it becomes harder and harder to keep up all the time. Once the standardized work, so painstakingly refined, has been in operation for a while, any problem is assumed to be the worker's fault.

The result is that workers become hesitant to pull the cord. A worker at the Mazda plant in Michigan describes the "Catch 22" in which a coworker found herself:

She had a hard time one day and pulled the stop cord several times. The next day management literally focused attention on her. Several management officials observed and they set up a video camera to record her work. She found herself working further and further into the hole. She got too far past her station and fell off the end of the platform and injured her ankle. They told her it was her fault--she didn't pull the stop cord when she fell behind.

It should be obvious that the potential weakness of the management by stress system is collective action by the workers. "Just-in-time," in particular, has made the union potentially more powerful than ever. The lack of buffer stocks makes quickie stoppages or slowdowns in support of an immediate demand extremely effective. The same is true with labor power--if workers in a department refuse to work, management has no extras to replace them. Action by even a few members could affect production drastically. Even the team meetings could be used as an organizing tool rather than a management forum; team members could agree to elect their staunchest union member as team leader rather than the person who is bucking for foreman.

However, the union has to be willing to use this power and able to organize it. The implementation of team concept and its most onerous variant, management by stress, has been possible only because of the enthusiastic cooperation of top UAW officials and many plant-level union officials as well. Many rank-and-file workers complain bitterly that their elected representatives see themselves as enforcers of the new way of operating rather than defenders of the few rights workers have left. Joe Pietrzyk, a worker at the Shreveport plant who supports the New Directions Movement, says, "The reason the team concept has worked so well in this plant is because the union worked so hard to make it work." Another Shreveport worker, Dan Maurin, adds:

Here, if you put in a committeeman call, the committeeman will get the GT's [foreman's] side first, and then come and tell you why they can't help you. You'll see them fraternizing with the GT, going down the aisle laughing and slapping each other on the back....

If you've got a problem your zone man will tell you 'just be glad you're working.' Or one of their favorite sayings is 'You've got to think of the team. The team comes first.' It's gotten so people don't bother to put in a grievance because they'll tell you in advance that it won't do any good.

UAW officials publicly defend the team concept as the centerpiece of a new era of worker participation in decision-making. Bruce Lee, a UAW executive board member whose jurisdiction includes the NUMMI plant, writes that at NUMMI, "The worker's revolution has finally come to the shop floor. The people who work on the assembly line have taken control and have the power to make management do their jobs right."

Privately, however, these union leaders concede that their real motivation for promoting the team concept is to make the Big Three more "competitive." They reason that there is a better chance of saving some jobs if others are cut in the name of efficiency.

This strategy does not appear to be working. Between 1978, the last year before the UAW began making concessions in the name of competitiveness, and 1987, the number of Big Three hourly workers was slashed by 32 percent. Even if the strategy were working, a looming question remains: what about the quality of jobs under the management-by-stress system?

There is a "Catch 22" for the auto companies embedded in the team concept: in order to function, the system demands a thoroughly pliant workforce. But the speedup, which is part and parcel of the team concept, is prompting auto workers, quiescent for many years, to revolt. The New Directions Movement captured 10 percent of the delegate seats at the 1989 UAW Convention and it established a formal organization at a spirited conference held in St. Louis in October, 1989.

General Motors et. al. should remember that in the 1930s in Flint it was the work pace and company arbitrariness, not wages, which led workers to occupy the plants and to join the UAW. An auto worker of the thirties whose name is lost to history spoke perhaps for the auto workers of the nineties when he said, "I ain't got no kick on wages, I just don't like to be drove."

Jane Slaughter is a staff writer for Labor Notes and co-author with Mike Parker of Choosing Sides: Unions and the Team Concept.

[Table of Contents](#)
