

# LABOR IN AN AFFLUENT SOCIETY



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published by  
New England Free Press  
791 Tremont St.  
Boston, Mass. 02118

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# **LIFE ON THE LINE \***

**Roger Rapoport**

The Ford Motor Co. auto assembly line here is an impressive sight. Bare frames are put on a slowly moving conveyor. Wheels, engines, seats, body sections and hundreds of other components are added along the way. At the end of the quarter-mile, 90-minute trip, finished cars are driven off to be inspected and shipped to dealers.

It takes some 275 workers to put the cars together on the Wixom line. To hear a guide at Ford's big River Rouge plant, a popular tourist stop in nearby Dearborn, tell it, life on the line is a snap. 'Each worker on an assembly line has one little job to do,' he says. 'It's simple. Anyone could learn it in two mintues.' That's bunk.

Working on the line is grueling and frustrating, and while it may be repetitive, it's not simple. I learned how tough it can be by working for six days at Ford's Wixom plant, which assembles Thunderbirds and Lincoln Continentals.

I learned first-hand why 250,000 auto workers are unhappy about working conditions. Ford calls Wixom the 'most progressive automobile assembly plant on the North American continent.' Facilities at the 10-year old plant here are indeed better than those at many of the 46 other auto assembly plants scattered around the country. Wixom is clean and well-lighted by auto industry standards. It boasts adequate rest rooms, plenty of drinking fountains and an all air-conditioned cafeteria. Even so, working conditions are less than ideal.

## **PROBLEMS OF QUALITY**

I also learned why quality control is a major problem for the industry and why so many Americans complain about poor workmanship in the cars they buy. I saw one blue fender installed on a white car and saw the steering column fall off another newly built car. Wixom's repair area, nearly the size of a football field, usually had a line-up of 500 cars waiting to have steering adjusted, scratches painted, brakes repaired and other faults fixed -- but not all defects are caught before cars leave the palnt. The four auto companies have recalled from customers more than a million 1967 model cars since last September because of suspected manufacturing defects.

Ford didn't know I was a reporter. Along with a handful of other young men, I was hired as a summer replacement, and to the personnel department I was simply, Social Security number 362-44-9616. The foreman on the line knew me as '9616' for short.

Names aren't necessary on the line. The conveyor moves at 1/6 of a mile an hour, and while that may not sound terribly fast, it doesn't leave much time for conversation. Also, the cacophony of bells, whistles, buzzers, hammers, whining pneumatic wrenches and clanking, rumbling machinery drowns out voices, so most communicating is done by arm waving and hand gestures.

Only two of the dozens of men I worked beside at various points on the line ever learned my name, and I knew only the first names of two workmen. One was Clyde, a husky Negro who had been an assembler for about a year. My first day on the job, a foreman assigned Clyde to teach me the ropes at one work station.

## **LESSONS FROM CLYDE**

Clyde, a 200-pound six-footer, showed me how to bolt the car body to the chassis in three places. It was fairly easy for me, a 160-pound six-footer. He showed me how to lean into the trunk, tighten two bolts and make an electrical connection. I managed that task, too. He showed me how to maneuver a big V-8 engine dangling overhead down into a car's engine compartment. By this time, I considered myself fairly versatile.

Then Clyde showed me how to scramble from one car to the next, putting chassis and trunk bolts in the first two cars and helping with the engine in the third -- all in less than five minutes. When I tried it, I got stuck in the trunk of one car, missed the chassis bolts on the next and was too late to help install the engine on the third car.

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\* This article is reprinted by permission from the Wall Street Journal of July 24, 1967.



Gradually, I became more proficient. But I didn't last long at any job. As a temporary worker, I was assigned to fill in for absent workmen at five different work stations at various times during my six days on the line. Except for Clyde, the men who showed me the jobs weren't very good teachers. One workman demonstrated the way to attach clamps to heater hoses, but he didn't mention that the clamps have tops and bottoms. A foreman caught my error after I had installed a dozen clamps upside down.

### LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Nobody told me to put on steering wheels that match the color of the dashboard -- I figured that out myself. But I made some mistakes because nobody warned me that tinted glass makes it difficult to distinguish the color of the dash by looking through the windshield. I installed some blue steering wheels on cars with aqua dashboards and mismatched a black wheel with a grey dashboard.

An experienced worker told me that a color-blind assembler recently installed the wrong color vent plates under the windshield wipers on cars for two hours before a foreman spotted the error and assigned the man to another job.

I wasn't checked for color blindness when I was hired. Rapid turnover and a major expansion at Wixom made getting a job easy even though the plant was heading for a temporary shutdown to make the annual model changeover. I passed a three-hour physical exam and an 11-minute written test. (Sample questions: 'Which of the following doesn't belong? spade, queen, king, ace; oak, maple, leaf, elm') There was no interview. I was issued a free pair of safety glasses, given a five-minute lecture on safety and plant safety rules, and told to report to work.

Along with some 2,700 other employees on the third work turn, I arrived at the sprawling suburban Detroit plant shortly after 3 p.m. and punched the time clock. Most of the men on the line were between 20 and 35 years old. Most wore sport shirts and slacks or green coveralls. About a third were Negroes.

The windowless assembly line area inside the two-story plant reminded me of a tunnel. Down the middle ran the assembly line. Overhead were fluorescent lights and conveyors carrying engines, fenders and other components. Tall racks and bins full of auto parts lined the sides. A narrow slit for underbody installations stretched the length of the line.

At 3:30 p.m., the conveyor began moving, and work started on the assembly line. For the next three hours -- until a relief man shouted at me to take a 20-minute break while he replaced me -- I rarely spoke or was spoken to.

For a while, I concentrated hard to get each job done within the 90 seconds the moving car was in front of my work station without dropping the five-pound pneumatic wrench on my foot. Every third car on the line was a Continental, and required a slight variation from Thunderbird installation procedures.

Nevertheless, each task soon became a mind-deadening routine, and my thoughts turned to everything but cars. ('You just leave your brains at home and work out of habit,' one experienced worker later advised me.) Sometimes, after many minutes of bending over and zeroing in on a moving target, I would step back and the line would appear to be stationary, while everything else seemed to be moving.

### CROUCH, STRETCH, ACHE

I'm in fairly good physical shape, but I ached all over after each day's work on the line. At one station, I had to bend down into the engine compartment to bolt on the steering column. To install carpeting, I sat on the door frame with one foot dragging and drilled holes, then stretched out on my side under the instrument panel to fasten the carpet to the floor. Attaching steering wheels meant stretching through the open car window to stick the wheel on the column and bolt it down.

Nobody seemed to take any particular pride in his work. Some workers considered some of the parts shoddy. The kick-pads that I installed under instrument panels, for example, were made of relatively brittle plastic and sometimes broke off during installation. One workman told me that 'over 400 of them broke off one month last winter.'

One day when I was helping two men bolt steering columns in place, the columns on a dozen cars were mounted



improperly by someone up the line, so we couldn't bolt them down and men further down the line couldn't attach the steering wheels. Such chainreactions often result from a single slip-up, and regularly snarl the precision of the computer-controlled assembly line.

It was Clyde who first told me what to do if I made or discovered a mistake. 'Get the next car and don't worry,' he said. 'They'll catch that one further down the line.' When I spotted the white Thunderbird wearing a blue fender, another worker explained: 'They'll paint over it in the repair shop. It's easier to catch it there than it is on the line.'

### CATCHING DEFECTS

About 10 repairmen stationed at various points along the way catch and fix some minor defects right on the assembly line. But it's up to the 15 or 20 inspectors along the line to check each car thoroughly and route those with improperly installed parts into the plant's 100-man repair shop. One inspector was an inexperienced college student. Some regular inspectors seemed far from dedicated.

I saw one standing with his eyes closed. When a workman pointed out a faulty engine, the inspector tagged the defect, then closed his eyes again. Once I spotted a loose steering wheel and told an inspector. He said he had just checked that wheel and 'found it tight,' but he double-checked and admitted, 'You were right -- it was loose.'

I saw a loose steering column fall off a Thunderbird when an inspector checked it. Later he told me that before lunch he had 'only missed marking up three loose steering columns which is pretty good since 80% of them were going through loose yesterday.' Another inspector farther down the line spotted the three loose columns.

An inspector who had five things to check on each car told me: 'There isn't nearly enough time to do all the inspections. I'm supposed to check shock absorbers, but I haven't had a chance to look at one in a month.' Another inspector jokingly said he inspects a car trunk just closely enough 'to make sure there's no dead foreman in there.'

### A 'SLOW' PACE

Because Wixom builds luxury cars priced to sell from \$4,600 to over \$7,300, the assembly line moves at what, for the auto industry, is considered a slow production pace of about 40 cars an hour. Some other luxury cars are built at a faster rate. General Motors Corp.'s Cadillac assembly line rolls out 50 cars an hour, and Chrysler Corp. builds about 55 Chryslers and Imperials an hour. Lower priced cars such as Fords, Chevrolets and Plymouths usually come off the line at a rate of up to 65 cars an hour.

That can seem like breakneck speed to a weary worker on the assembly line. The speed of the line, in fact, has been a major cause of half a dozen local strikes by United Auto Workers Union members at other auto assembly plants in the past few years.

Even Wixom's pace seemed fast to me. When my 20-minute break started at 6:30 each night, I staggered to the pop machine to buy a cold drink. Then I looked for someplace to sit and rest. There aren't many places to sit in the plant. My favorite spot was atop a cart loaded with big white laundry sacks full of dirty coveralls, a place where I could stretch out.

Sometimes a few workers would talk and joke during their breaks. Foremen and other supervisors were the butt of many jokes -- particularly one balding supervisor who was referred to as 'Khrushchev.' But the assemblers actually got along well with the foremen, who worked hard themselves and generally were patient and polite when correcting workmen's mistakes. Supervisors insisted on informality. When I called one 'sir' he quickly told me: 'That isn't necessary around here.'

### SCRAMBLE FOR LUNCH

After my relief period, I spent another hour and 10 minutes on the line. Then at 7:30 p.m. the conveyors stopped, and the scramble for lunch started. There wasn't time to wash the grease off my hands or pull the slivers of glass



fiber insulation out of my arms before eating.

Usually lunch periods were staggered, but sometimes the day's production schedule was arranged so that all 2,700 workers in the plant ate at the same time. The first day that happened, I cut in near the front of the long line outside the air-conditioned company cafeteria. It took 15 minutes, half of my lunch period to reach the counter, pick up iced tea, milk, soup, roast beef, Jell-O, pie and pay the cashier \$1.50. I ate in 11 minutes.

That left two minutes to go to the bathroom and another two minutes to get back to my place on the line. I had indigestion for an hour after lunch. Some workers had to wait 25 minutes to get served that day. I don't know how, or if, they ate and got back to work in five minutes.

Many workmen brought sack lunches and sat on stock racks or in cars on the line eating sandwiches. Eating in the cars was against plant rules. Nevertheless, when I was installing carpets, I frequently had to throw out lunch sacks, cigaret butts and coffee cups along with the usual assortment of screws, fuses, and bolts before laying a carpet. I picked an empty beer can out of a car, too -- even though another plant rule prohibits drinking alcohol.

Safety rules frequently were violated, too. I saw foremen running and assemblers jumping across the assembly line trench, both supposedly forbidden. Occasionally there was horseplay on the line. But I didn't see any accidents. Indeed, when I was there Wixom had gone two million man-hours without an accident.

### JOKES AND CONCERTS

Ennui set in during the second half of the work turn. To break the monotony, some workers played practical jokes, like detaching the air hose from an assembler's pneumatic wrench. Others performed timpani concerts on plant ventilation ducts with rubber mallets. They hooted and whistled whenever women office employees ventured into the production area.

My second relief break began at 10 p.m., and lasted 16 minutes. (In the UAW's contract negotiations with Ford and the three other auto companies, the union is demanding two 30-minute paid relief breaks daily for assemblers. Auto workers aren't paid during their half hour lunch periods.) There was less bantering among workers during the second break. Some of them talked of quitting. One man grouched about 'too much pressure' and said: 'When I was working in an auto parts plant, I could meet my quota in four hours and then goof off, but here there's no rest.'

When the quitting whistle blew at midnight, smiles returned to most workers' faces. They washed up quickly and headed for the parking lot. I drove straight home and went to bed. But some of the men went out moonlighting. One young guy making about \$3.30 an hour at Wixom worked several hours as a night pressman for a small morning newspaper. Another, earning about \$3.50 an hour, went home and slept for five hours, then put in eight hours doing maintenance work at a nearby golf course. 'I made \$11,000 last year,' he told me.

After the final whistle blew on my last work turn before the plant closed for model changeover, Clyde kidded me at the water cooler. 'You should feel ashamed of yourself, taking all that good Ford money after the way you worked,' he said.

Hiring me might not have been one of Ford's better ideas, but I think I earned my \$110 take-home pay. Ford apparently thought so, too. The foreman told me to report for work again, when Wixom resumes production next week.

But I don't intend to go back to the plant -- except perhaps to pick up my pay check. Ford wouldn't mail it to me. 'We've got 6,000 guys who would like to have their checks mailed to them' a personnel man told me. 'What makes you think you're any different?'



# ***WILDCAT: anatomy of a work stoppage\****

**Steve Fox**

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(Editor's note: This is a brief report on an unauthorized work stoppage (commonly known as a wildcat) in an automobile assembly plant in Detroit. Since most of us have never worked for any length of time in a factory, the report provides us with some idea of the conditions and dynamics of a wildcat.

Directed against the abuses of the corporations, often these insurgencies are also aimed at the union bureaucracy which has continually refused to combat with management over many rank and file demands for better pay and more humane working conditions. The wildcat represents the failure of the union bureaucracy to deal with the conditions that affect workers, and the affirmation by the insurgents of the basic right to make management comply with workers' demands. The specific reasons for the wildcats are many and depend in large part on specific plant circumstances, but in general, they focus on a demand to alter working conditions.

The paper is significant because it indicates the impressive ability of workers to organize their own strike. The word of the wildcat passed from shift to shift, and workers immediately left their jobs and remained at home despite pressure from management to return to work. They never questioned the legitimacy of this illegal strike. Too often our picture of the common worker as reactionary and affluent obscures the fundamental radical consciousness fostered at the work situation. Workers do not need to read about the horrors of capitalism; they face it on the job. While many workers initiate the wildcat knowing that it will soon be crushed by management or the union (or sometimes both), they still must offer some resistance to their oppressive working conditions.)

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On Wednesday, November 14, 1967 at 1:00 p.m., a hundred or so workers in the trim shop at Hamtramck assembly in the heart of Detroit stopped work without union authorization. Then they walked out. Picket lines were set up and by night shift the Chrysler plant of over 8,000 workers (55 to 60% of whom are black) was shut down tight. It stayed down for three days, and only one line of one shift worked that Saturday because workers simply didn't come in, despite calls from both the union and management. The question is, why did it happen?

## **BACKGROUND ATMOSPHERE**

The week before, on Wednesday, November 8, the national Chrysler agreement was tentatively reached, just before the midnight deadline. The agreement came at a time when there were a number of crucial wildcats going on, one by the UAW truckers which halted or slowed production in a number of Detroit plants, including Hamtramck Assembly, and another at the Chrysler Sterling Stamping Plant. The atmosphere was charged. The national agreement did not give basic protection on working conditions. The Company moved.

## **SPECIFIC CAUSES OF THE WILDCAT**

The week of the signing of the agreement (November 8) the Company speeded up the sewing machine classification. The 400 or so sewers are to get 5¢ an hour equity in the new contract; the Company decided to get its 'equity' by getting the nickel back through increased quotas.

Much earlier the Company had announced that they were advancing the production schedule on the Charger line for November 1. Because of the contract negotiations the Company postponed it. The increase was to be an advance of

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\* Steve Fox lives and works in Detroit, Michigan. He is presently engaged in working class organizing.



6 cars per hour, from 56 to 62. In addition, the Company was increasing the difficulty of the jobs by changing the mix. This means that the Company had been running 28 Chargers and 28 Baracudas but now was going to run 42 Chargers and 20 Baracudas. There is more work to do on the Charger than on the Baracuda.

During the wildcats of the truckers and the workers at the Sterling plant the Company had changed the work stations in preparation for the speed-up. The workers came back Wednesday, November 15. They were immediately hit by a leaflet signed by 21 in-plant elected leaders, from the skilled trades, production workers and a predominantly black caucus, calling for rejection of the national agreement. This was done on the basis that the wage increase was not all that hot (at most a nickel an hour over three years more than an extension of the old contract would have brought for production workers), that no protection was established on working conditions, that there was no end to compulsory overtime, etc. Then the Company began the speed-up of the line. The workers said 'later for that' and the plant was shut down tight.

### CHRONOLOGY OF ACTION AND THE ROLE OF THE UNION LEADERSHIP

When the workers from the trim line walked out that Wednesday, their steward walked out with them. This is extremely significant both for the morale of the men and the danger of the steward being fired for instigating or leading an unauthorized work stoppage. 60 or so of the workers went to the union hall to discuss what they were going to do. Others went home or were sent home. The officers of the local, Dodge Local 3, knew about what was happening but didn't show up. The compact line, the other line that was working worked till the end of the shift. The body shop workers who work close to a mile away from the trim shop heard about the walkout in trim and walked out themselves spontaneously at 2:30 p.m. after eight hours (they were scheduled for nine hours).

The pickets appeared at every gate with makeshift cardboard picket signs at the time the night shift was supposed to go into the plant. The night shift didn't cross the lines. The local union officers came onto the lines and told the workers to stop picketing and disband. The workers ignored them.

The next day, pickets were at the gates at 5:30 a.m. and the plant stayed down. Later that day there was a ratification meeting for the workers from Hamtramck Assembly and the Huber Foundry. It was held in the middle of the suburbs. Nonetheless, over 3000 workers packed the hall.

International and local union officials could hardly speak because of the booing and heckling. The workers would only let their own spokesmen speak relatively unhindered. These were the steward who walked out with her people, the plant committeewoman from trim, and representatives from the predominantly black caucus and skilled trades. Everywhere in Roma Hall workers were wearing buttons and cards with NO scrawled on them in magic marker.

The workers decided to carry on the work stoppage until they got relief on grievances and working conditions. However, that night the local union leadership made a deal based on vague and glittering promises with one of the rank-and-file groups (the leadership of which had not originally been involved in the walkout and was not manning the picket lines) to get the workers back to work. Friday the plant remained shut anyway, but the process had begun to reverse.

Friday was the day of the ratification vote. Workers came down to vote but did not work. After 6:00 p.m. when the polls closed, a group of about 20 workers with the steward from trim who had become the primary spokesman for the grievances of the workers went to the union hall. They went to challenge the counting of the ballots. Although every 'safe' group was allowed in, this group of workers was not. The door was locked against them. The workers smashed the glass door to gain access. The union bureaucrats behind the door were shocked -- and scared. They called the police. However, when the police arrived, the bureaucrats were afraid to indicate what they had seen: how would it look in the plant if it became known that they were prosecuting rank-and-filers and an elected union executive official for trying to enter their local? The workers and the steward, of course, had seen nothing when they were questioned by the police.

### DISINTEGRATION AND AFTERMATH

The walkout was spontaneous. It was not well coordinated throughout the plant. Except for a few individuals there



was not a firm leadership. Finally, it didn't have much, if any connection in organized form with other workers outside the plant. The workers therefore went back to work, unhappy. Monday the plant was more or less in full operation again.

Two workers who were in the original walkout were fired. One was framed up by a stooge who slipped lightbulbs into his pocket. He was searched at the gate, the lightbulbs were found, and he was discharged. Another was discharged for 'absenteeism.' On Monday, November 27, a leaflet was passed out throughout the plant asking a series of questions which pointed out what was continuing to happen in the plant (see below).

That same day the body shop almost walked out twice.

## THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

What happened at Hamtramck Assembly is happening throughout the plants in the auto industry to a greater or lesser extent. In fact, it is happening throughout most industries in the United States. That is, not only are conditions getting worse, but workers are fighting back more fiercely and more extensively now than in close to twenty years.

The direction that this country goes is dependent upon what the 63 or so million workers do, how successfully they organize, how consciously they begin to see the need for qualitative change in this country so that the majority which built this country can control it and get the economic and political benefits of a truly free society.

This we must not forget. More, it is towards this crucial segment of American society that we must orient and win if we are to succeed in building a better society.

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### - WHY -

1. Why hasn't Domanski met with the company to this date? (ten days since the walkout)
2. Why is Domanski looking for a scapegoat for the walkout when he knows very well that working conditions triggered the walkout?
3. Why are working conditions worse today than ever before?
4. Why are foremen working throughout the plant with no protest from the Local?
5. Why are the Local Officers ignoring the work standards problems and have not called a single meeting with the company? Can it be that now the National Agreement is all wrapped up for the next three years they couldn't care less what happens in the plant?
6. Why are our people again going to keep killing themselves on the lines?
7. Why has Domanski promised the membership that work standards problems will be worked out, when he himself as a top National Negotiator on Work Standards negotiated no change on standards?
8. Why did Domanski stay in Labor Relations office laughing when the walkout occurred when he knew that the workers went to the Union Hall to meet with the officers about the problems that prompted the walkout?
9. Why are we now forced to work ten hours when we are killing ourselves in eight?
10. Why isn't our Local pushing for a second shift on the Charger line when we have only one line and Charger work is being shipped to St. Louis?
11. Why are Union officials slandering, smearing and lying about the walkout in the same manner the Company is? They know full well that the Local 3 workers just like the workers in Sterling, the Truckers, Belvidere, Newark and elsewhere utilized this period to rebel against the terrible conditions and to call attention to the need for help from our top officials.
12. Why was the November membership meeting cancelled illegally in this crucial period? Are the officials afraid to face the membership with nothing to report except that they have hidden and run away from the problems?

THESE ARE QUESTIONS WORKERS ARE ASKING IN THE SHOP. SO FAR WE HAVE BEEN MET WITH STONY SILENCE.

RANK AND FILE COMMITTEE



# THE BRUNS STRIKE: a case study of student participation in labor\*

C. Clark Kissinger

One of the strangest anomalies in the current student movement is its estrangement from labor on the operational level. On almost any major campus you can find activists who have clocked hundreds of hours on the picket line for civil rights, defense of Cuba, etc., but try to find one who has recently participated in a labor dispute in his local community. This lack of contact is even stranger when one considers that many of these activists consider themselves to be socialists of one kind or another. At the very least, they consider labor to be 'the most liberal "mainstream" institution.'

In hopes of stirring some interest and showing what can be done with just a little effort, I would like to recount the story of student participation in a small strike in Madison, Wisconsin, from June 1963 until the present (October 1963).

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Bruns Garage, Inc., the franchised Volkswagen dealer in Madison has a record of anti-labor sentiment. Attempts to unionize the shop several years ago failed, even though the wages of mechanics ran about a dollar an hour below the going rate for union shops in the city. The establishment is a family business with most of the managerial and secretarial spots filled with members of the Bruns family. Thus the people 'up front' did indeed present a united front to the men working in the shop. Also profits from the business are expected to support the various branches of the family in the manner in which they are accustomed to living.

In the early spring of 1963, UAW Local #443 succeeded in signing up a majority of the Bruns shop. An NLRB election was held and the UAW local was certified as the bargaining agent for the shop. This period was marked, however, with the use by management for the first time of suspensions for alleged infractions of work rules. All suspensions were drawn by outspoken union men, and the shop steward was suspended for three weeks.

The union submitted a contract to management which was based on an existing agreement with another garage in town. It was summarily rejected by management, who offered a counter-proposal which did little more than recognize the existence of the union.

In the meanwhile, the company charged that the employees were engaged in a slowdown. (At a later NLRB hearing they were unable to provide convincing evidence of any slowdown using their own records. The mechanics were called together and told that they would have to beat the manufacturers suggested times or else they were fired. In particular, they were told to complete a one hour and 55 min. inspection and lubrication in one hour and 30 min. The mechanics interpreted this as the preliminary to firing them all, so all 12 union mechanics walked out on May 24.

A picket line was set up the first day and the firm has been continuously picketed since then. But the first month of the strike was essentially wasted. The garage still had all its management, clerical staff, sales and supervisory personnel, body shop and wash boys. There was some difficulty at first in replacing the mechanics, but soon strike-breakers were being driven in daily from Rockford, Ill. The only troubles experienced by Bruns were (1) a short interruption in service, (2) cessation of many deliveries, as the Teamsters and all other unions were honoring the line, and (3) a conviction and \$100 fine for advertising for labor without stipulating that a labor dispute was in progress. In short, it was business as usual.

For their part, the strikers were not faring too badly. Liberal strike benefits began at once, and were supplemented by the local until the practice was stopped by the international. The strikers attempted to service cars in their home garages and solicited their services to cars entering the struck garage. But there was no real pressure on Bruns to settle. His business was open and in no real trouble. He was supremely confident that the mechanics would soon get tired of walking up and down in front of his place, and would soon drift away. But the strikers had good reason to be

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determined. Their wage scales had run from \$1.60 to \$2.32 an hour. Most of them took home less than \$60 a week. They had no job security, grievance procedure, or sick leave. They even had to pay for the VW emblems that went on their uniforms! On the other hand, Brun's was charging the customer \$5.50 an hour for labor, with labor being figured according to the manufacturer's suggested times.

Early in June, I drove my VW out to Brun's for the specific purpose of asking the men on the picket line where I could get my ailing car fixed, since Brun's had something of a monopoly on VW service in Madison. I was delighted to let them work on my car, and got most of the strike history from talking with them. It was quickly apparent that some of them were already ready to give up the strike and had good job offers elsewhere. It was also apparent that the Brun's Garage would never be forced to a settlement if things continued as they were going. So I offered to get some of my friends and come out to Brun's the next Saturday to see if we could close the place down. The strikers were enthusiastic and agreed to bring their wives out.

June 22, almost one month after the start of the strike, was the first day that the garage was really picketed. With about thirty people we were able to turn away virtually every car. Saturday is normally Brun's busiest day, but Saturday the 22nd they didn't take in enough money to even pay their utilities -- and they were plenty mad. They called the police immediately, and three patrol cars were on hand. They also tried to intimidate the pickets by taking individual pictures of them. But the day ended with strikers and students having a few beers in the local pub.

The next Saturday the garage was closed because of a death in the family. But on Saturday, July 6, we were back -- and this time with an added attraction: the first issue of Picket Line News. I had seen the need to convey the strikers' message to the customer in writing, since many people were reticent to stop and talk at length with the pickets. They just wanted to get in and have their car fixed. Hence we began the publication of our weekly sheet, printed at our own expense on my mimeograph machine.

The attack on Brun's now began in earnest. To win the strike, we had to stop customers from going into Brun's. To do this we had to give them some place else to go -- and we had to get the message to them. We continued our big Saturday pickets, hoping at least to cut Brun's business to the extent of his profit margin (there were always pickets present whenever he was open, though). But the big step was the mechanics renting a building to set up a shop. We were then able to offer the customer an alternative. Then the distribution of Picket Line News began in earnest. We began with the University parking lots, but toward the end of the summer we had central and western Madison divided into 14 distribution zones. If you owned a VW, it was hard to avoid getting a copy on your car each week. We even printed bumper stickers ourselves. And gradually the effort paid off, until today we have a situation where more cars come to the strikers' garage every day than go to Brun's.

All was not peace and light, however. Students (myself included) were twice threatened with physical violence on the picket line. And Brun's obsession with violence led him to hire off-duty Madison policemen (in uniform) to guard his establishment at night (nothing ever happened to it). He paid these cops \$3.00 an hour until the practice was stopped by the Mayor after a stink was made about it in the local papers. Brun's also took to hiding his new cars on a farm out in the country.

What is the status of the strike today? The NLRB has just concluded hearings on unfair labor practices which it brought against Brun's and a favorable decision is expected later this year. Brun's is hurting financially, but would rather lose money than see the union win. They have spent a fortune in legal fees alone for action in court, before the NLRB, and before the Wisconsin Employment Relations Board. The strikers are making more money now than when they worked for Brun's, but they have spent a good deal on outfitting their shop. In short, although student participation has dropped because of school, Brun's cannot win the strike. It is only a matter of time.



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And what have we learned from our short-lived fling in labor?

1. The strike would have certainly collapsed without student intervention. Even the strikers admit this.
2. Close relations were easily established with the strikers even though many of the students were known radicals (I was chairman of the Wisconsin Socialist Club at the time). It was only necessary to prove that we were sincerely interested in winning the strike and not using it for some political purpose.
3. We were amazed at the degree of customer support. People seemed to innately despise a monopoly, and many were openly hostile to Bruns. The strike would have been impossible without customer support.
4. We were able to observe the workings of a typical local at close range. Aside from regular financial support, the union was of little or no help. The local has no employees (the president works full time in a body shop) and in practice all negotiations and important decisions are in the hands of the International representative. The rep has a large territory to service and comes by infrequently. The men are completely on their own as to how to conduct their strike. They get no help from other members of their local.
5. Organized labor in Madison as a whole area was of some help. Pressure was placed on the city to get the cops out of Bruns, and many locals in the city donated money to the strike fund. I was able to help some in this since I sat on Madison's central labor body as the delegate from my local of the teacher's union.
6. Late in the summer another UAW local in town struck a local battery factory. I got students to walk on their picket line (even though they didn't need it), and they reciprocated by sending people out to Bruns on Saturdays. Exchanges of this type are very feasible.
7. We were surprised by the degree of political awareness (class consciousness?) shown by some of the strikers at both strikes. Some spoke spontaneously about automation and unemployment (generally with regard to their children).
8. It is difficult to maintain student interest for a prolonged struggle, but tremendous bursts of energy are available for short run activities. People are available for short run activities. People are now talking about forming a permanent 'Friends of Labor' group on campus, and general interest in current labor problems has picked up.



# BLUE RIDGE: The History of the Levi Strike\*

Brenda Mull

Levi Strauss came to Blue Ridge, Georgia in 1956. The people who were first employed were told by the Company, 'If and when you prove to us that this plant and area can be a productive and profitable one, we will build a new plant and expand.' To me this is like me saying to someone, 'Show me a profit and I will expand and make more. I don't take any chance of losing money.'

It only took three or four years for a crew of totally untrained and unskilled people to prove they were a profitable and progressive group of workers. This may not seem like a great feat to people who know nothing of plant progress, but take my word for it as a worker of this type, it is just short of a miracle.

There are, however, several facts that should be known and told about the conditions the employees of Levi had to work under during the first three years: the kinds of wages earned; the entire picture of how the operation of the plant went.

## GRIEVANCES

To humiliate everyone and to prove himself to be a man of little thought to others, the manager hung an old-timey bath tub and a bar of soap on the wall. There was a sign by it saying, 'If anyone does not have a bath at home, they may borrow this one.' My people are not like the tub presented them to be. It seems to me he pushed sanitation in some ways while disregarding it in others. The bathrooms would tear up and run over onto the floor, but nothing was ever said about this.

The women would go to work and carry an extra sweater along with their regular winter coats, because they never knew if there would be heat or not. They were made to stay and work with their coats and sweaters on until the fuel man would arrive. This might be three hours after starting to work or after dinner. Nearly every time the fuel ran out, they had to wait until the company was called and could find time to come and fill up the tank.

## JOB SECURITY

I and others have heard the workers say: 'I had a job and drew a small weekly pay each week, but I was afraid to go in debt or be dependent on my job. I never knew from day to day if I had a job or would be fired.'

One woman put it like this:

I went to work at the Levi plant in Blue Ridge. One of the supervisors there did not like me, and I was fired shortly after going to work. I went to the Levi plant in Murphy, N.C. I said nothing of working at the plant in Blue Ridge, Ga. I worked there for several months and was placed on the floor as supervisor, simply because I was qualified. Shortly afterwards, the supervisor from Blue Ridge plant came to Murphy and seen me working. In less than a week I was fired.

This is the kind of job security poverty people have.

Equality was an unheard of thing at Levi Strauss. We sat there slaving and sewing, while others who catered to the boss walked the floor and made no pretense to do their job. The slavers were the ones who were fired -- not the lazy. Why? Because we were the independent ones and did not cater to the boss.

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\* Brenda Mull, one of the Blue Ridge strikers, is now secretary of Appalachian Enterprises, Inc., the co-op that the strikers set up. Contributions for the co-op should be sent to her at Box 66, Mineral Bluff, Georgia. This article originally appeared in The New South Student, April 1968 (Vol. 5, #3).



## THE NEW PLANT

The new plant was built around 1960, on property donated in part by the business people of Blue Ridge. During the change over from the old building to the new one, some of the workers were laid off as long as nine months. They did draw unemployment, but a lot of them weren't called back in rotation as they should have been. The favored individual went back first. Also, some of them weren't called back at all -- even if their work was satisfactory.

As you read this and think, 'Oh, that isn't much,' you must keep in mind that it is the day to day things that make up the industrial worker's life. Also, that these 'little' things can knock a girl's pay day. First, to prove that all wasn't well in the plant, go to the old saying, 'figures do not lie.' During the time Levi has been here, they have employed over 3,800 just to get a work force of 560 employees. These people came from a three-county area.

In an area where there is little work and people only have a grade school or high school education, a big company feels it has the right to deplore the people. All unorganized plants pay just what the law requires of them. If you are on production, an employer must pay a few cents according to the wage law. This is exactly what Levi and others do.

## THE BUSINESS CONSCIENCE

There seemed to be absolutely no feelings for the employees' problems, large or small. There was one employee whose work record was excellent and who never asked for time off unless it was absolutely necessary. Her mother lived about two hundred miles away from Blue Ridge. Her mother had been sick for a long period of time. The employee only went for visits with her mother on long weekends and holidays because the company kicked so about being out of work. The mother was already bed-fast, and then she had to have her leg amputated. The employee asked off to be with her during the operation, and a couple of days later, to see if she was going to be all right. The doctor doubted that her mother would make it off the operating table. Since the operation was to be on Monday, the lady would need to stay at least until Wednesday morning to be able to tell how things were going. The company asked her to go and stay Monday and come back Tuesday, although there were only three full working days in that week, due to a holiday.

To me, these are some of the real problems of Southern labor today. Also the things that helped to bring on the strike. People being thought of as animals, and being treated like them. Why does this sort of thing happen? Probably because people are uninformed of these problems and don't really understand. It is, however, each and every citizen's responsibility to make things like this (as well as national problems) their business too. If we do not, things will never be any different.

## THE ORGANIZING BEGINS

At the very beginning of the organizing, the people who first started the wheels to rolling, knew that the element of surprise would help to bring a victory. There had been a meeting called and some cards signed before the company realized what was happening to them. Although during the debate about Levi coming to Blue Ridge, Levi said they were not anti-union -- probably meaning United Garment Workers, the company union in three or four of their sweat shops -- upon knowledge of I.L.G.W.U.'s presence, they began to do everything they could to prevent a union victory. The people were quizzed like this: 'There are union cards being signed, aren't there? Do you know what union it is? Have they got far enough along to get cards signed? Do you know anyone who has cards in the plant to sign?' Then one woman said to another, 'The boss said if you all want a union, to let this all die down and he will bring one into the plant then.' I am sure it would have been nothing short of a company union to keep a good one from coming in. That is the way we were thought of -- ignorant and totally incapable of knowing better than that type of thing. To me, this is one of the most insulting things a boss could do to me. Like children in school.

After I had decided to forget anything the company did and totally ignore it, they came up with a shocker. They took five dollars from the original pay check and wrote a separate one for five dollars with a note attached indicating that this would be our union dues and there would be all kinds of assessments and raises in dues that we would have no way of doing anything about. Then the company took us back to grade school days by having us ask their supervisor before going to the rest room.



## UNION VICTORY

I feel that you can see now, after reading the real facts and figures on my people's lives, why the union was voted in by a vote of two to one. Before the election, the plant manager had agreed to announce the outcome over the speaker system. After he learned the results, he refused to do so. The votes were counted and totalled just before quitting time. We learned the results from a union man outside the plant as we left. It was passed on to others still coming out of the plant. Everyone was jumping up and down and hollering, blowing their horns and all. One girl who had been forced into saying 'I quit', before the election, was out on the lot dancing a jig. The people were so excited that two of our own people bumped each other's cars. One woman was so excited that she backed over a cross tie which separated and marked the places to park. Then she proceeded to go back over it before ever getting out of the lot.

What sticks with me the most at this point is the morning after the election. It was like a funeral all over the plant. You could almost hear a pin drop, even with the machines going. No one was talking; everyone was doing her work the very best she could. All the excitement had left everyone and had been replaced by fear and worry. We all knew trouble was on its way, more than even now that the union was voted in and that we would have to stick in there and fight with everything we had to stay alive and to keep the union going.

## LACK OF SUPPORT

I should point out here that we were more determined to keep the union alive than the union was. This was our biggest disappointment. After we had fought so hard, it was shocking to realize what some international unions were like. I will just say a few honest words about our union, but I never want to be taken as anti-union. (1) I.L.G. signed a terrible contract for us which gave Levi power to crush us and our local union. (2) They did not back us up even where they could have, because of their policy that 'You take what you can get and hope for better next time.' This let the company think our union was not behind us. (3) Even when we had taken so much that we warned the company and the union we would have to talk out if it continued, the union took no solid stand. They say they couldn't support our 'wildcat' because of the no-strike clause, but they let the company violate their end of the agreement every day. If this is union policy in the South, we say it should be changed, or unions will lose the support of the people that make them rich. Somehow I look back on our victory with regret. Not of organizing, but of learning just how unjust things are here in America and in our laws. It still gives me the feeling of being in bondage. We were a group of people fighting for justice and our rights, not knowing all that was against us. We learned it wasn't just Levi Strauss. I see that the blame has to be shared with our law-makers and politicians plus some hard-headed businessmen that are out for the dollar and that is all that matters to them. Not the people who make it and spend it to make them rich.

## THE WALKOUT

The last straw, that brought things to a head in the plant and caused the walkout on August 10, 1966, was an incident about seniority on machines. The company had started changing machines any way possible in order to raise production so high that half of the girls -- especially the union members -- could not make production. By this I mean that they would give a girl a production rate she could make on a new machine but not on her old one. Then they kept her on her old one. This happened mostly to union members. Their job became very difficult and tedious and was a big strain. New machines would have taken the strain off. We warned the company a month before the strike that, unless any new machines that came in were given to the girls with the most seniority, we would walk out. Both the company and the union were warned at the same time that we weren't going to take any more. Our contract did cover this problem. Although the contract was weak and practically everything ended or started with the clause, 'If in the opinion of management. . .' we felt that the union could have taken a stand for us. This was our greatest disappointment.

On the very day of the walk-out, our shop steward, Mrs. Darlene Davis, went to the office and told the manager we were walking out if the new girls weren't taken off the new machines. The manager called the side-seamers into the office and tried to talk the anger down. After this, the shop steward again reported to the manager and told him we would walk out. He said, 'Go Ahead.' The walk-out occurred at five minutes after noon. The irony of it all is the number of people who came out with the union members and never returned to work. A large number of



the non-union members came around asking if it would be all right to walk out with us -- that they knew we were right and they just could not sit there and work. They left that day and did not return the next day. Only a few people on the evening shift went to work that evening.

### ON THE PICKET LINE

The strike started out with a lot of violence and trouble from the town. A truckdriver pulling a load out of Levi pulled a gun on us to get safely across the picket line. There was a fight in the shopping plaza between two or three anti-union people and two or three strikers. Several of us went to see what was happening. When warrants were served, all the women who weren't involved got them too. When it went to court, seven witnesses, including the sheriff, said they weren't involved. But they were all fined. While we pleaded our case the judge looked out the window. This is the justice we're dying for.

On September 31, 1966, one of the picketers was hit by a car. She was picketing lawfully. Everyone feels it was no accident the car went so far out of its way. The picketer went to the hospital with a fractured vertebrae. The case was taken to court, but all charges against the scab who hit here were dropped and dismissed. When the scab accused the same girl she hit of throwing a rock at her car, the striker was fined. Justice, justice, in Blue Ridge, Georgia.

During the time our girls were picketing at night, they were harassed and one time even shot at. The pellets from the blast fell on top of the tent they were using for shelter. Blue Ridge police pretended they were too busy to do anything about it. Gordon Ware, an officer of our local, had his house shot into one night. Another striker's house was shot into and the walls outside were brick and the inside was panelled. The bullets went through the brick and the inside wall and right into the mattress of his children's bed. There was nothing done about these crimes against our people.

Mrs. Darlene Davis, our shop steward, was a very active member of the union. One night, about 2:00 A.M., her husband woke the family up saying, 'Get out. The house is burning down.' Somehow they managed to get the fire out before it destroyed the house. They stayed with relatives the rest of that night. On the following night, the house caught fire again and burned to the ground. No one was inside. Mrs. Davis's son, who was in a case from his waist down, had nightmares for a long time after that fire.

After a year of picketing, without the support of our union or our town, Levi has called a decertification election and won. We have no one left to depend on but ourselves.

Not long after we lost the strike, we met some organizers from Atlanta, and we began to talk about a community organization for all the workers in our county. Its purpose would be to pressure companies like Levi out through boycotts, etc., and also to work for more decent local government. We called it the Southern Labor Association. But we all knew after a year of struggle and going hungry we better start thinking of ways for people to earn a living too. The idea of a co-op factory of our own came up. Since then, we have organized our own factory, employing 64 people, mostly strikers, and most of us have been working for nothing for a long time to get it off the ground. But it is going now and we are all very proud. Naturally, we have a lot of problems to iron out, but we are working full time on them. From here we're going to build our community organization. We proved to everybody we could do what we said, and now we're going to do something else we said: 'Make Fannin County a decent place for working people to live!'

