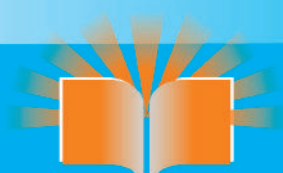


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## Global Auto Workers' Concerns And Perspectives: Is There Any Life-enhancing Future For Labour?

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### Abstract:

Industrial employers are at war with their workers. Examination of the labour situation over the last decade supports this description of labour relations in the global automobile industry. In this milieu, this paper takes stock of the auto workers' concerns and perspectives as against the rhetoric of managerial concerns and perspectives and points to the likely future of labour movement for labour welfare.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The working class has been, no doubt, on the receiving side of neo-liberalism. Associated with this has been the deplorable decay in labour politics to bring about labour welfare improvements. A quintessential example of decadence in labour movements is the role of AFL-CIO in USA and its labour imperialism as well. As Scipes (2005) points out, throughout much of its history, the AFL-CIO has carried out a reactionary labour programme around the world. It has been unequivocally established that the AFL-CIO has worked to overthrow democratically-elected governments, collaborated with dictators against progressive labour movements, and supported reactionary labour movements against progressive governments.

In this milieu, pro-industrial democracy or pro-'quality of worklife' academic and union activists have generated a grassroots workers perspective of auto lean production in the North American context as also the Asian context. Workers perspectives are also valued by those industrial relations scholars who define the heart of industrial relations research as INJUSTICE and therefore are concerned about the ways in which workers define and respond to it. These scholars believe that the field of industrial relations will not be preserved as a valuable area of future study unless it takes its distance from the intellectual agenda of dominant class interests including its intellectual focus only on "how work gets done" (Kelly, 1998; also see Kelly ed., 2002) and starts examining how workers fight or do not fight for dignity, justice and respect against rapacious bosses—large, medium, small and tiny. Documenting working conditions and workers' resistance including that of non-standard workers mostly neglected by the established unions and figuring out new worker mobilization strategies are the new challenging tasks for a new labour movement to emerge worldwide for the sake of "decent work for all". It is in this backdrop that this paper takes stock of workers' concerns and perspectives.

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## 2. WORKER CONCERNS AND PERSPECTIVES

In general workers perceive a sense of impermanence through threats and tempst that is blowing through the labour force, so to say borrowing from Klein (2000). They also sense the changing world to be a "world of 'dog eat dog' a world rife with conflict and competition—class against class, business against business, nation against nation—in which not to win is to lose" (Dowd, 2000).

In particular in respect of auto lean production the writings by Fucini and Fucini (1992), Graham (1995), Moody (1997), Parker and Slaughter (1994), Lewchuk and Robertson (1996 and 1997) and Rinehart et al. (1997), just to mention a few, are a good initiative in this regard. Their point of departure is what life is like in a lean factory; in other words, what are the working conditions as discerned through participant observation as described by the workers themselves. The findings in this regard constitute a coherent critique of lean production from North America.

In this connection a demystifying Canadian revelation is that industrial success based on lean production can be achieved not on the basis of innovative human resource practices but through tighter process discipline and control. This is a success that arises without diffusing the authority within the organization and empowering the workers to improve their working conditions. The lean production masters have not responded to this practical thesis of New Fordism (i.e. lean production without generous employment conditions) till date, which holds good in most parts of the world including Delhi NCR/India.

The responses from workers that they have little authority to make decisions, are constantly working as fast as they can just to keep up, have little opportunity to communicate with other workers, and are monitored more closely, testify to the ground reality that there is no quality of working life in terms of worker empowerment. There are five sets of complaints and grievances from workers: (a) it is difficult to get time off from work or leave workstation to go to the washroom due to increased level of surveillance over workers; (b) work pace is too fast and there is too little time for the work assigned; there are too few people to do the work; (c) there is less cooperation between workers; (d) there is no exercising of creativity; the skill definition is being able to do the job correctly by following the standard operations guidelines determined by management; and (e) teams are a spurious air of employee participation and control; they are not a mechanism of exercising some control over the working environment; rather they promote self-control and peer control that inhibit individual development and control of work; (f) health and safety are compromised, there is increasing incidence of cumulative trauma injuries or repetitive motion based and wrist injuries (like carpal tunnel syndrome, numbness of hands) stress due to work intensification, long working hours through compulsory overtime, etc.

In the typical North American factory, there are no Japanese type HRM in terms of life-time employment and age-based merit based pay system; there is no profit sharing or bonus scheme; workers are paid hourly rates determined by the job they perform; job rotation and team working are not common. The Canadian Automobile Workers Union has rejected such attempts made by the management. The unions are not like the yellow-union type 'enterprise unions' in Japan. The same story as above holds good in the factories of the suppliers/subcontractors.

In this critique, it is interesting to note the hermeneutics of the workers and unions, i.e. how they interpret through their own experience the text of the management and government ideology. For example, what is good for Corporate America is not good for workers. Corporate America, by talking about 'high-performance workplace of the future' envisions a workplace in which flexibility is the central objective. It requires a work force that can be adjusted with ease. That means the unbridled use of temporary workers and subcontracted workers who can be pulled in when needed and discarded when not needed. It means minimizing the number of permanent workers and maximizing interchangeability. Similarly, the management's definition of "work smarter, not harder" through participation programmes turns out to be different from the worker's definition. The time-study man says it is smarter to fill up every second of available time with "value-added work". The engineering consultant says it is smarter to have one person do the work of three. The worker, meanwhile, thinks it would be smart to save her back by taking time to stretch, and even smarter not to destroy the jobs people need to live. Lean factories worsen the already existing ground reality of fewer jobs and longer hours for workers that Yates (1994) had pointed out. Similarly, competitiveness means profitability. When unions embrace competitiveness of their firms, they only help to cut jobs and make the remaining jobs worse. Competitiveness can never be a win-win situation for workers and employers despite all the sugarcoating of competitiveness that economists, other academics and labour officials do. All the things that companies do are means toward the only one measure of a firm and that is its profit rate (Slaughter 1993). Again, to employers, decent work or good jobs are nothing but barriers to competitiveness, but the union vision makes good jobs or decent work the goal. The union vision of good jobs includes not only working conditions but power and freedom from fear. Lean production is nothing but management by stress. Speed-up, just-in-time, multi-skilling, intensified



Taylorism, workers' right to stop the assembly line, all these elements of lean production combined to create a system where any mistake has consequences that are visible to all—as is any idle time. The lack of slack means each worker must exert extra effort to keep the system functioning. This stress is deliberate and designed to keep all working at the top of their capabilities. Workers' dignity is presumed to come from sucking up to and striving for management's goals, every second of a minute and every minute of each hour worked, so to say.

According to Parker and Slaughter (1994, p. 37), the glowing accounts of how workers feel about team concepts for life in lean factories or what they call management-by-stress plants in America are “based on reports of company officials, union officers or consultants who have some vested interest in the (participation) programs being declared a success. Some very positive descriptions are based on interviews at the time the plant was starting up.... (However).... the conditions, the role of teams and teamwork during the start-up period are transformed by the time the lines reach full production speed. Some reports are based on testimony by workers specially selected by the company to meet reporters. The distortions are then compounded by authors who know little about what life is like in a factory. There is certainly a minority of workers in management-by-stress plants who claim to love their work situations. There are even workers for whom the discipline, regimentation and hard physical labour of management-by-stress plants fit their personal needs. There are also some workers who have received or hoped for positive perks such as trips to Japan or promotions. But there are several reasons why these views do not provide an accurate picture of the views of most workers in the plants. And they mean even less about how the system would be accepted if spread to still more plants and more workers. (The reasons are as follows) 1. Most of the new management-by-stress plants were able to select their workforces from a huge pool of applicants. Over 130,000 applied to Nissan and 96,000 to Mazda. The companies screened carefully, so that the workers at these plants are not a representative sample of working people. 2. The number of active supporters will probably decline as the plants get older. Experience with Quality of Work Life programs shows that in the early stages of these programs workers are usually positive about them and tend to give management the benefit of doubt, because workers would like to believe the premises of participation and respect. 3. Many workers privately admit to the pressures and the difficult pace—‘eight hours of aerobic exercise’ some have called it. But they defend the company because it provides them with the only decent-paying job they are likely to get. While many fear they will not be able to keep up with the pace when they grow older, they fear even more losing their jobs immediately. They accept the view that if the company were not to run essentially the way it is, there would be no jobs at all. They also believe that public criticism of the company will hurt sales and threaten their jobs. 4. The sense of fear in management-by-stress plants is striking. The power exercised by supervisors combined with little sense of either union presence or individual rights, chills the desire to criticize a plant where company loyalty is a priority.”

At the end of the day, what is a good job, in a rank and file workers' perspective? This question is important even as many unions these days tell the workers to just be glad that they have a job. But, historically speaking, unions were not formed just to help workers hold on to any “goddam fuckin’” job, but to improve wages and working conditions on those jobs. The purpose of a union is after all to take away management's arbitrary power to set pay and production standards to work workers into the ground. To put it differently, unions were formed to help workers create good jobs: “Surely a really good job would be one that is interesting that allows you to learn, that gives you control over your work pace. A job that makes you want to come to work in the morning. Since the dawn of industrialism, at least, most jobs, even the ones considered good, have not fit that description. Some have settled for the other components of a good job: good pay, good benefits, good vacations, reasonable hours, and a work pace that doesn't wear you out by the end of the day, or before you're old enough to retire. A safe job is one that doesn't make you sick. Under the competitiveness philosophy, good jobs of either type are scarce. And to rub salt in the wound, we are constantly bombarded with propaganda that tells us that lousy jobs are good jobs—that we now are ‘empowered’ and have control over our work lives. For the sake of competitiveness, give up the idea that you, or certainly your children, can have a stable job. Give up the idea that you should have a job that doesn't give you carpal tunnel syndrome. Like the anti-union worker at Nissan's Tennessee plant, you should just shrug and say ‘Everybody's hand's hurt’. All this is necessary so that your employer can be competitive” (Slaughter, 1993).

Revolutionary Worker (1998) presents an account of workers' concerns and workers' perspective via a long auto workers' strike in the US and its harsh impact in terms of massive job losses on the workers, especially the older ones, in a context where General Motors was moving out of brownfield sites in the US to low-cost greenfield sites in the Third World in order to implement lean production there. It is an account very instructive in indicating the labour impact of blackmailing power of capital mobility in a world where labour is not so mobile. A similar story in Japan exists in terms of Suzuki closing down and sacrificing its workers in Japan and moving overseas. Protest Toyota Campaign, 2002. Another similar story is that of

Ford moving out of Dagenham in Britain (see Ray, 2000). Downsizing and outsourcing have devastated the lives of workers so much so that Greider (1997) has called the diminishing impact on the lives of workers in the advanced countries such as the US as the effect of "the global labour arbitrage". Bluestone and Harrison (1982) have documented the colossal quantitative job loss in America due to outsourcing and downsizing and what happens to the workers affected. Furthermore, workers feel very let down and hurt as the lean and mean applies only to them even as the management becomes bloated with rising compensation so much so that American corporations are bearing high bureaucratic costs on the one hand and applying the stick strategy of wage squeeze on the workers, on the other. This lopsided development wherein the bloating factory bureaucracy spends its time not in producing but in supervising those who do, was exhaustively and definitively unearthed by Gordon (1996). Whether this kind of divide between management and workers is increasing is an area of research that needs to be done in all the countries, except in Japan where we gather that the costs of adjusting to profit-squeezing competition are borne by the managers/owners as well.

In Japan the National Confederation of Trade Unions (Zenroren) had this to say about Japanese workers in the late 1990s: "Workers' living conditions and employment are critically deteriorated. This is apparently shown in the lowest level of wage increase in 1998 Spring Struggle, decrease in their real wages and consumption, increasing rationalization measures with dismissals, increase in temporary workers including part-timers and the highest ever unemployment rate recently recorded.... Capitalism in our country claims deregulation and further flexibility of existing minimum labour standards which are already far from international ones not complying with its rule" (Zenroren, 1998).

Collective bargaining is a form of employee participation in decision making. But unions are now advised to drop collective bargaining and fall in line with the quality, productivity and flexibility reforms of the employers. The message is clear: unions cannot survive otherwise. Collective bargaining as a basic trade union right, as a basic labour standard is now downgraded to be a form of begging that appeals to the "goodwill" of the employer. We are back to the 19th century when in most countries it was opposed by governments and employers which branded the unions' demand to negotiate and sign collective agreements as a violation of the sacred rights of private enterprise and individual freedom. This is not surprising because the strike threat from the unions is integral to collective bargaining, and in the context of lean production or New Fordism as its vulgarized version, a strike would paralyse the interdependent workplace in the production chain, and so the dictatorship of capital is too evident in many experiments in terms of anti-collective bargaining. Coercing the workers to fall in line, and that too without creating a structure of suitable incentives at the workplace in terms of job security enlarging the workers' piece of the economic pie, etc. is a commonplace observation. A basic principle of mainstream free-market economics is that "people respond to incentives". Incentives are the essence of modern economics as Prenderghast (1999) underlines. But the employers scare two hoots for this. In most lean workplaces the only incentive is that "you hold the job with the fear of losing the job" and apart from that the other incentives the workers are interested in are now made out to be non-negotiable. It is not surprising therefore that workers see the Total Quality Management that is not connected to the reward system—as a new fangled speedup (Lewin et al., 1997), where by more is taken out of workers in relation to a declining real pittance given to them.

AMRC (2004) is a good initiative on creating knowledge of the working conditions of automobile workers in Asia. This is a selective publication of numerous articles and presentation by union researchers, activists and academic researchers in the international workshop—"Automobile Workers and Industry in Globalising Asia"—which the author of this paper had attended. The salient findings about labour in Asian automobile industry are as follows. In the core locations such as Japan and Korea, job security has become a grave concern for the workers. Firms such as Nissan, Hyundai and Isuzu do not hesitate to implement dramatic reengineering methods like mass dismissals of workers. The so-called life-time employment for the core workers in Japan and Korea has become a myth as voluntary or early retirement plans are introduced and have become a routine practice in the name of 'crisis management'. Job vacancies, which are no longer filled by recruiting full-time permanent employees, so that the number of full-time employees steadily are decreasing in all major auto firms. There is a generalized practice to adjust labour force by employing temporary workers or in-house subcontracted workers, whose employment contracts are seasonal or at best renewed annually. Lack of protection for temporary seasonal and contract workers ultimately means that labour is individualized in relation to capital, thereby resulting in worsening of the already existing, inherent unequal power relationship between capital and labour. To put it differently, employment relations become truly individual relations between individual capitalist and individual worker without the intervention of the state and collective union. Many functions and services previously handled directly by big assemblers have been relentlessly transferred to small businesses without however the lead firm completely losing control over those functions. Hyundai management has accelerated module-based production and subcontracted out modules so that direct production in final

assembly plants is minimized. The whole subcontracting chain has been overhauled resulting in harsh impacts on workers. Toyota has increasingly applied merit-based pay systems.

In the expanding emerging locations such as China, India, Thailand, Taiwan, Indonesia and the Philippines, whether there is labour unrest or not, the situation is very grim. Massive job loss through mass layoffs or retrenchment apart, there is a catalogue of woes referring to degradation and brutalization of labour relations in terms of salary cuts, aggressive outsourcing and use of irregular workers, relocation to greenfield sites within and across countries, declaring legal strikes as illegal, derecognition of legally established majority unions and dealing with pro-management yellow unions, unfair dismissal of dissenting workers without severance obligations, co-opting militant workers through promotions, travel abroad, training in Japan and others such privileges, criminal assault by the employer mafia and police, including gun shootouts, on workers and union leaders, governments destabilizing unions and brutalized state repression in support of employers' blatant labour law violations, use of highly abusive language and physical manhandling inside factories, union busting, contract-killing of militant workers or union leaders, not allowing workers to have their own union, taking almost 60 seconds of work from each minute, increasing the speed of work, surrendering of union members due to lack of staying power in resisting, etc. Much of this is not explicitly documented and published but the less one is in ivory towers and the more one is with workers and union leaders, the more one comes to know numerous stories of the free-for-all ugly and lethal human side of the brave new world of lean factories as part and parcel of the hegemonic regime of corporate feudal fascism (Snyder 2004).

The most difficult challenge for workers and unions is to overcome the rampant tendency of employers to take industrial disputes out of the national industrial relations system and transfer it to civil courts where they can better use their financial might. They probably also draw upon political connections and corrupt practices. How can unions fight this strategy unless they stand even across borders and gain political influence in order to re-establish a just legal system? One does not know. What one knows is that the outside world knows all too little about what is going on in the auto workshop of Asia and Southeast Asia (Wad, 2003).

The Chinese workers are increasingly subject to market-based labour management that is not all distinguishable from others in Asia. Security of jobs is under threat as firms introduce competitive employment adjustment methods like mass dismissals, early retirement schemes and contracted workforces replacing permanent workforce. On top of this, seniority-based wage systems are being replaced by skill level and individual contribution to business. The socialist framework of supporting workers' livelihood has crumbled as public housing, health care and education are individualized and marketised. In sum, it is a gross misunderstanding that the Chinese autoworkers benefit from increasing investment in China at the cost of autoworkers elsewhere.

In India, almost every automobile company with state support, especially in North India which has got the most uncouth employers and authorities, has attacked labour left and right. Some say that Ford is the worst employer internationally and Ford India the worst in India. They have resorted to union bashing, mass dismissals of workers on strike or not, increased use of contract workforce and increased outsourcing of subassemblies to subcontractors. In times of recession as in 1998, layoffs, reduced working days, non-payment of wages or other benefits, declaration of voluntary retirement scheme, imposition of effective cuts in wages, etc. were implemented by the owners in the Indian automobile industry in the name of crisis management and manpower rationalization. The year 1998 also saw some important resistance by workers against this onslaught, in which a few struggles were victorious with many mercilessly defeated and decimated (John, 1999). Workers' struggles at Maruti-Suzuki in 1999/2000, 2001 and recent workers' struggles in Maruti's vertical supply chain are not only questioning New Fordism but also opening up possibilities for labour to act as a countervailing power against the excesses of dirty employers and managers.

Thus, the consequences of industrial restructuring in the Asian automobile industry both in core and newly emerging locations are increased working hours, intensified work, less labour protection and finally difficulty for unions to deal with such a scenario. In most of the countries, there are no industrial unions; trade unions are enterprise-based and this seems to undermine effectively coordinated responses from unions to automobile capital in general. The only way unions can create a logical alternative to "competition to death" comes down to bringing about effective solidarity between various individual trade unions. There are some promising developments on this front in terms of solidarity between unions in assemblers and suppliers, and solidarity across countries. Attempts at organizing the in-house subcontracted workforce are also exemplary. However, in many cases, automobile unions are subject to management control and lack of democratic decision-making. Struggles are sporadic, they emerge as flare-ups or raptures and are often isolated from other unions and international solidarity is rarely to be seen. The idea of forming industrial unions and federations between unions within a country and across countries has



not really taken off in terms of ground realities which are very much governed by the “divide and rule” strategies of the internationalized auto firms (La Botz, 1994). This global problematic and challenges also the problematic and challenge of the Indian automotive working class! Wishful thinking has given way to some solid efforts in terms of using internet or making other attempts for worldwide solidarity in this regard. That must augur well somewhat for the workers in the national and global auto production chains.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Most books about liberalization and globalization these days are pretty depressing, concentrating on the growing reach and integration of local capitals as also transnational corporations and their ability to bend political and economic policy everywhere to the ends of greater profit. While many writers see clearly the cost in human lives, most do not really believe workers can do much about it. Socialism is dead after all. Ameliorating the worst effects of capitalism on men and women is about the best we can hope for. Workers come off as victims, sometimes able to win small improvements but powerless to challenge the nature of the system. But those who are steadfast in raising the question of the alternative to capitalism will not give up pointing out that people need a positive and proactive vision of a future of social justice and equality, not just an understanding of the evils of the present system. These activist people and the fighting working people in conjunction with the world wide efforts, especially aided by internet, at building up social solidarity across national and global production chains will determine the short term nature and character of what is in store for labour in general and auto labour in particular.

The most severe headache for labour concerns how to respond to subcontracting/outsourcing. The public policy response to subcontracting that Helper (1990) suggests must be heeded by whatever labour movement that is still there intact. Where unions exist, labour political action will have to take place so as to make subcontracting less profitable as an active component of any collective bargaining strategy. Where unions do not exist, organizing nonunion subcontractors would go a long way to solving the problem, though it is easier said than done. But what else is the pragmatic way out in the near immediate sense? More importantly, how labour politics can build industry wide and region wide and nationwide and global solidarity networks is an action research that needs to be supported and completed.

In the absence of future research and action on these lines, the truth will remain unchanged thus: “One thing is certain, the world of work is constantly changing but often looks familiar” (Grint, 1998) in terms of the overwhelming darkness of the lawless bloody low road of predatory exploitation of labour.

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