

Various Authors

Wildcat: Dodge Truck June 1974

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Introduction

Those of us who cooperated on the publication of this pamphlet did so because the wildcat strike at the Chrysler Truck facility, June 11–14, 1974, struck a raw nerve in us. Two of us have had direct experience working at the plant and the others have heard stories for years from friends about the situation there. When a publication was suggested, we all responded enthusiastically.

We were excited by the collective decision of thousands of Chrysler employees to deny the authority of daily wage labor and, for even four days, to say no to the demands of the alarm clock, the production line, bosses, union bureaucrats, Judges and cops. In a society where daily activity serves so much the interests of others and so little our own, the efforts of so many to reclaim even short-run control over their lives seemed worth writing about, giving the event consideration and drawing conclusions as we saw them.

We don't intend this publication to perpetuate the process wherein "authorities" or "experts" tell others what reality consists of. This is done daily in the media and works to keep us in the status of passive observers of our lives while the rich, the famous and popstars are projected as the "important" people and the real actors of history and the creators of events.

This time it was different. Events were shaped and determined by those who usually are only spectators. The principal author of this pamphlet recorded and photographed events as they happened to him and others during those four days. The rest of us were interested in the wildcat and read several things about the role of unions, talked among ourselves a lot and finally produced what you are holding.

We are not a "political" group. We are not trying to "organize" anyone into a political party or "movement." We are not trying to exhort others to greater heights of activity. We, two auto workers, a printer, a student, a teamster, a secretary, and two unemployed, want to do the same thing in our lives as the Dodge Truck strikers did in theirs: free ourselves from the tyranny of the workplace; stop being forced to sell our labor to others; stop others from having control over our lives.

But four days is no good. It only whets the appetite for what is possible. What can be done for four days can be done permanently. We want to live our lives for ourselves. We are Millard Berry, Ralph Franklin, Alan Franklin, Cathy Kauflin, Marilyn Werbe, Richard Wieske, Peter Werbe.

The Beginning

Trucks began rolling off the line at dawn on Friday, June 14, as if it were a day of normal production at The Dodge Truck Plant in Warren. It was, however, quite an abnormal day. For the previous seven shifts no production had been the norm, had been natural and quite inevitable, Six thousand strong, the truck plant workers had imposed a work stoppage on their employer, beginning on Monday afternoon, that was only just now ending.

The grey dawn fit up a strange scene in front of the plant on that morning, remnants of the just-ended uprising: scattered groups of police in full riot gear, paddy wagons; and in the plant parking lot, a flatbed truck (Dodge) carrying several police and a black-robed Judge.

Ten people were in jail, following the twenty who had been arrested the day before. The arrests culminated a united effort by the corporation, the courts, the police, and every level of the union hierarchy to break the wildcat strike. On Friday morning, they finally succeeded, No one really expected the strike to happen until it was actually upon us, as if everyone were surprised to learn that everyone else was thinking the same thing. Sleepy day shift workers got stuck in a traffic jam on Mound Road in front of the plant on Tuesday morning and waited for traffic to clear. It soon became obvious though that no cars were going into the parking lot, and then whoops went down the stalled line: Strike!, we're on strike!"

Clustered at the gates were some two hundred picketers, marching in front of the entrance and running out into the slow-moving traffic to hand out copies of a sketchy leaflet.

"Last night," said the leaflet. "Chrysler fired four workers from the 9110 (metal shop) second shift including chief steward Steve Smith. We walked out and shut down the plant. Chrysler says we're risking our jobs. But there comes a time when we have to start fighting back."

". . . Ten days ago on May 31st about 100 workers from 9110 decided it would be a mistake to go to work. Although we didn't shut down the plant, we cost Chrysler plenty of production."

This incident, a sick-in over working conditions, had drawn a threat of discipline from the company, a threat which, in turn, led to a brief shutdown of the metal shop when 50 workers piled into labor relations and successfully demanded the company back down. The same thing had happened on day shift, but Chrysler had reluctantly decided to hold off disciplining the walkout participants until the following Monday, when the local UAW officers would return from their Constitutional Convention in Los Angeles. Management was quite certain the union could dampen any anger that might arise then.

But their certainty was misplaced, for when four workers were fired that afternoon, the collective response was immediate and effectively unanimous: within the hour the plant was shut down by a spontaneous walkout. That evening, the rebellious workers assembled at the union hall and voted overwhelmingly for a plant-wide strike. It was a bold move, but it met with 100% support Tuesday morning when the day shift came in.

The three days following the initial walkout blurred together into a flurry of strike meetings, picketing, rage, and Joy. People we'd bumped into everyday and never known suddenly became close friends, and we felt our own power and determination almost for the first time.

Previously dull eyes glowed, grumblings turned to laughter, and unwilling submission was transformed into total resistance.

What a contrast to work! There the unstoping line grates all of us until we can hardly tolerate ourselves, let alone others. Day shift and evening shift blame each other for everything, unless the old-timers can blame it on the irresponsible youngsters, or the young workers can blame it on the privileges of seniority. Blacks and whites exchange hostile glances, tension boiling just below the surface, just because there is nowhere else for it to go, and no way for us to go elsewhere.

And everyone who can't just turn it off stays as doped up, doped down, drunk, nodded out, and high as possible. Stumble in, stumble out is the work ethic at Dodge Truck . . . until of course we decided to stop working.

And when we did, and the plant went down, suddenly all the human qualities that Chrysler had taken from us were ours again. We cooperated in decisions, we moved together and were one body with one interest . . . Shut it down! Racial tensions vanished, and all other antagonisms became as useless as the silent machinery in that hole of a factory.

Union efforts to divide us went from the insidious to the ridiculous. At one point, Art Harvey, Local 140 President, claimed that complaints over bad conditions, and the strike itself were just the work of communist agitators, that everything was alright and we should return to work. We booed and laughed him from the podium immediately, and afterward he claimed in a TV interview that we were ignorant and didn't know that "the union doesn't support the strike." We weren't ignorant, we were well aware of the union's position, and we knew why it had that position.

We got our super rushes when news went around that other plants were walking out with us. Shift change at the neighboring stamping plant sent electrifying rumors through a strike meeting on Wednesday that they had walked out. The Chrysler Sherwood Assembly plant actually went out on strike with us, both for their own demands and ours, realizing that if we were to do it at all, we had to do it together. Workers from other Chrysler factories (Mound Rd. Engine, Dodge

Main) appeared at strike meetings and on the picket lines to offer support and carry back news of what was happening to their own plants.

Almost as an afterthought, on the third day of the strike, someone suggested we should draw up a list of demands for the strike. Except for the demand for complete amnesty, the list eventually compiled had little direct focus. There were, of course, the specific grievances of working conditions, forced overtime, etc., but it was obvious from the conversations on the picket line what the strike was really all about: everything. Exchanges were peppered with “Watergate”, “inflation”, “those assholes in the union”, attacks on the institution of “work” itself. It was, in fact, a total frustration with and rejection of all the things, inside and outside the plant, which exercise control over our lives. No matter what we might have won in short-term demands, if we had won, no one would have returned to work happily.

During the heat of the uprising, we found it impossible to imagine returning to work. We had come so far and become so much. But gradually, the 500 plus workers packing the strike meetings and marching in front of the plant saw the wildcat going nowhere. Chrysler had marshalled its forces and all had performed their assigned functions. The union had divided and confused workers by declaring the strike over when it was not, by declaring it work of a subversive minority of outside agitators, and even by parking their cars in the plant lot to give the impression workers were returning to work when they weren't. The police, some of whom were very polite, performed their “duty” regardless of their sympathies and arrested picketers at the direction of a judge who took it upon himself to appear at the plant personally to see that justice was done.

As one factory, we had less power and endurance than did our employer and we had to return to that down of all downs, the reproduction of daily life.

The People

Dodge Truck, officially known as the Warren Truck Assembly Plant, began production of pickups and panel trucks in the midst of the depression years of the thirties. During WWII, as was true throughout American industry in general, the labor shortage and demand for war production in the plant drew a large number of blacks, both men and women, up to Detroit from the south in search of work. Along with the local white workers employed there at the time, they now constitute the “first generation” population of the plant, many of whom are presently approaching their 30 yr. retirement dates.

For a decade between the mid fifties and sixties, the plant population remained relatively stable and hiring was limited primarily to replacements for departing

workers. At the end of that period, gradual hiring began as Chrysler started, laid off, and then restarted a second shift of production. In spring of 1972 this shift became permanent and hiring was stepped up until the plant population eventually doubled.

The new hires on this shift were a significantly different group from the generation which preceded them; many were young men, 19 to 22, who had just returned from the war in Southeast Asia, and they looked and acted unlike any other group of vets before them. Longhaired, dope-smoking, contemptuous of authority, they poured in to the plant as Chrysler tried to respond to the then-current publicity about hiring the unemployed vet. Flashing discharge papers or merely a tattoo, they walked past lines of waiting applicants and were ushered into what was, for some, their first real job.

The war, for them, was not just a radicalizing experience, where they learned to deal with authority by fragging their officers; it was also a unifying and solidifying experience, which imparted to the whole group a strong sense of identity and collective power. Many firmly believed that their resistance to the war was one of the crucial factors in forcing the eventual withdrawal of US troops from combat, and by the time they arrived at Chrysler's any willingness to submit to authority and the arbitrary demands of production they might have had was gone.

Common to many of these young people, both black and white, was a strong desire to settle down and start a home. Disgusted and disillusioned by their war experiences, the vets were at first happy to enter civilian life, but they soon discovered that at Chrysler's it differed little from army regimen. Here, however, they did let you go home at night. (As one well-worn joke has it: "I tell my old lady, when we get married, all you've got to do is cook for me and wash my clothes, because I 'm getting fucked by Chrysler.") Rebelliousness was quickly rekindled and militant activity (both "legitimate" and prohibited) became increasingly more frequent.

Maybe fifteen percent of the Truck Plant workforce is composed of women, most of them black, most of them supporting families, alone. None, of course would work there unless they had to and many were actually forced to take production jobs and give up their ADC by the welfare bureaucracy.

In strictly numerical terms, the population of Detroit is currently split almost 50-50 black and white. Because of the racist nature of hiring patterns in this society, blacks make up most of the unemployed (10.9 "officially" for the state, higher in Detroit and higher among blacks), and those who have jobs are concentrated in the lower-paying, dirtier, less skilled occupations, i.e. the factories. And the biggest auto factory employer in the city is Chrysler.

As the weak sister of the big three, Chrysler is trapped here in Detroit, unable to generate the capital to move to the cheaper labor markets in the south and

overseas, to which the other two are now forced to turn. Most of its production is concentrated in Detroit and immediate area, in facilities which are ageing and dilapidated, and the workforce in most plants ranges from fifty to one hundred percent black.

Given these factors, there exists in Detroit an informal, loosely-knit “family” of people who share a common employer, working situation and stomping ground. Everyone has a brother, sister, uncle or father who works in an auto plant, thus news can travel quickly by word of mouth and connections are very direct. Naturally there are common attitudes shared widely in this community.

The white Chrysler “family” overlaps somewhat with that of the black community, and, although not as centralized in one corporation or one geographical community, also has a vast informal communication network between families and friends that extends into the other auto companies as well. (Most of the whites employed at Dodge Truck come from the Northeast suburbs of East Detroit, Roseville, Mt. Clemens, and Warren, as well as Detroit proper.)

The racial divisions that are inherent in American society extend into the plant. More noticeable in the geography of the Motor City and the various communities that make up the factory workforce, the antagonisms between black and white are actually less in the factory. Racism is perpetuated by ordinary folks upon themselves as much as it is imposed upon them by controlling forces in society. The rejection of these tensions is one of the most basic necessities of concerted action against Chrysler, and this became a reality in the uprising at Dodge Truck.

The history of Local 140 that follows, is to some extent the history of racial tensions working themselves out in various political mediums, and finally breaking down altogether in the wildcat of June.

The Local

Traditional union politics at local 140 began their decline in the spring of 1972 when management started the second shift of production. Then-incumbent president Norbert Mahaliek was a bland, stereotypical union bureaucrat whose base of support resided primarily in the older generation of high-seniority white workers, most of whom were in the skilled trades. Mahaliek’s previously entrenched leadership (and its thinly-veiled white racist nature) was soon challenged by a new rising power which sprang from the “second generation” and took as its leader black, fast-talking Willie Stoval.

Politically skilful, Stoval capitalized upon black workers’ antipathy for Mahaliek’s group and quickly rose to the powerful position of chairman of the plant bargaining committee. When he pulled together a predominantly black slate to

challenge Mahaliek in the May '73 elections, many black workers, despite their cynicism about unions in general, voted for the slate in the hope that a black leadership might at least be a little more "representative" of their interests. Stoval won. and with him, Art Harvey, previously the token black in Mahaliek's group, who now assumed the position of Local President. It was apparent from the start that Harvey lacked the ability to manipulate people necessary to his position, and when the '73 contract talks arrived the task of "resolving" them fell upon a leadership which was, by leadership definitions, inept.

Conditions in the plant had been going steadily down hill and anger among Chrysler employees was growing nationwide. The day the Chrysler-UAW contract expired, Dodge Truck workers, in addition to a half dozen other Chrysler plants around the country walked out ahead of time. By Midnight that day, Leonard Woodcock, President of the UAW International, announced a company-wide strike, turning a one-day spontaneous walk-out into a week long, "official" strike.

Halfway through this "mini-strike" the UAW International settled with Chrysler and ratification of the contract took place a few days later. The terms of the settlement were disastrous and all the more so because they could have been obtained without a strike, but the UAW fostered and extended the initial strike to accomplish two explicit reasons. One, it gave the workers the illusion of having applied real pressure to the company, implying that valuable concessions had eventually been won, and two, it allowed a cooling-off period just long enough for workers to feel the pinch of not receiving their weekly paycheck.

The strike also served other incidental purposes. Before the contract was ratified, Local 140 officials escorted a crew of ironworkers across the picket lines to make sure that Chrysler would make good use of the down time by working on the plant facilities. The local union office even went so far as to call striking repairmen at home asking them to come to work. The union wasn't even required to pay a penny in strike benefits because the payments don't start until the second week of a strike.

At the ratification meeting for Local 740 some two thousand people lined up outside the union hall on a Sunday morning and voted one big NO on everything. No one had the slightest inkling what was in the local agreement, but it was still turned down along with the national agreement. It was a total vote of no-confidence against the union.

For a second ratification attempt the union held a meeting at a neighborhood high school auditorium and handed out copies of the local agreement. Learning the content of the agreement only angered the workers even more and the meeting quickly broke up to thundering chants of "Vote No!" while the contract was voted down again.

Approval of the contract finally came when President Harvey threatened to take the plant out on strike over the Christmas holidays, a move which would have cost everybody their vacation pay. Harvey was in fact threatening a union-called strike against the workers, while attempting to lay the blame for the contract rejections on the “white-hippy-communists.”

The truth is, the contract rejections signified an end to the free ride that the new black union leadership had been given among the black workers. People saw the union, even more clearly than before, as simply an arm of the company labor relations unit, and went to work each day a little more angry. At that point visible resistance went underground, surfacing when it did in sporadic walkouts. Absenteeism and sabotage increased and acts of violence against foremen continued on an individual basis. From November 1973 until June 1974 over 150 grievances were filed, and twelve to fifteen of them, at least, were strikeable issues over contract violations.

Willie Stoval had seen greener pastures for himself by that time and had taken an appointment as an International rep, only too glad to be out of the boiling unrest at Dodge Truck. Mahaliek, the ousted president, went back to work on the shop floor, but only for a short time. He was soon elected committeeman and teamed up with chairman of the shop committee, Chet Peterboro, in a mutual effort to further their own political careers.

Mahaliek and Peterboro sat on the piling number of grievances, refusing to act on them or pass them up to the level of the local president. They spread rumors and then agitated in meetings for a strike vote, knowing that any explosion that might come would blow up in Harvey’s face discrediting him and the incumbent leadership, as the two of them (Mahaliek and Peterboro) slid quietly into the background.

The wildcat strike in June came and had exactly that effect; Harvey was made to look like a fool, and his value as an effective controller of the work force was eradicated, leaving the way clear for other aspiring controllers to step in.

After the uprising, the union held a strike vote so that workers who had the previous week voted with their feet, could now register their passive vote in a ballot box. The union urged a “yes” vote on the strike, the leftist organizers urged a “yes” vote to “legalize our wildcat”, and even the company got into the act, urging “Be sure and vote today”, on a billboard at the plant gate. The urging was so great in fact that some began to wonder exactly who this strike vote was really for.

As it happens of course, the strike vote was held to legitimize the union, to restore control to their hands, and to give the impression that they were actually acting on complaints. The likelihood of a “legal” strike occurring though is about as great here as it is at the Detroit Forge Plant, where a Strike vote passed

overwhelmingly last year is still awaiting ratification from the international. (The Dodge Truck vote here carried 2,000 plus to 377, and evokes visions of the old Laurel and Hardy comedy routine where a character opens a door to leave a house that has collapsed, leaving only that door standing.)

The first union meeting after the uprising, on July 16, marked the return (temporarily) to the underground for worker resistance at Dodge Truck. Even after much urging by radicals to show up and make themselves felt, less than a hundred people came and asked questions, getting only evasive answers. Two workers conspired to bring in a lunchbox full of eggs, hoping that things would become heated enough for them to lob their feelings about the union at the bureaucrats, but the situation remained too calm to warrant even that. The union is now in control of itself again and production goes on, one after the other.

The history of UAW Local 140 is not the history of a leadership with a constituency working together for a common end, and it never was. It is the history of a body of workers acting, individually and collectively, to resist the domination of their lives by a corporation, and of a reactionary organization of career "leaders" whose only activities have been directed entirely toward quelling that resistance, always after it arises, and always for the furtherance of their own ends.

Workers over the past two years have moved through several levels of tactics in attempts to fight company pressure, some of which have included attempts to use the union as a vehicle, attempts which have always had the same outcome. The election in May '73 was a once-only reform experiment to try a new, more "representative" leadership, and it failed, inevitably. Seeing this failure, workers moved on further and voted one big "NO" against the union itself on the issue of contracts. When this, too, failed, as it eventually had to, the wildcat was the next logical step, an attempt at collective direct action against the company which circumvented entirely the power of the union. But the union and company still have sufficient power to destroy such isolated efforts of resistance, and they have temporarily regained the upper hand.

The direction and intensity of workers' resistance, however, have already moved beyond any further faith in unions. It remains only for workers to find the expression of their resistance solely in a faith in themselves, a process which, as evidenced by the 4 days of solidarity in June, has already begun.

The Organizers

On Wednesday, third day of the wildcat, the farces opposing the strike dealt what they hoped would be their most powerful blow against the unity of the strikers. The Detroit Free Press carried an article by reporter Billy Bowles giving

the complete personal background of Steve Smith, fired chief steward from the metal shop, who they claimed was leading the strike. Detailing his membership in the Revolutionary Union (a Maoist group from California) and his activity in a strike in Pittsburgh, the story's clear implication was that Smith had hired in at Dodge Truck solely for the purpose of fomenting labor unrest.

At the time, the article was treated with no more seriousness than Art Harvey's charges of communist manipulation, since it seemed clear to everybody that the strike had taken Smith as much by surprise as it had the union and the management. As one young worker put it: "I just can't believe that some guy would hire into this shithole and work for four years just to lead a strike." Smith himself readily conceded the essential accuracy of the facts contained within the story, but denied strongly the implications. "Sure I'm a communist", he said, "I've been open about it from the beginning. But communism isn't the issue here. This strike is over working conditions in the plant."

But Smith's easy dismissal of his communism as "not the issue", far from clearing the air, seemed only to beg the issue. For many workers, demoralized by the strike's eventual failure, it gave even more substance to the fears barely stirred by the newspaper story, that what they thought to be their own spontaneous act of resistance might indeed be only the result of the manipulations of "outside" agitators. In truth, Smith, and any number of other Marxist-Leninist political missionaries, have hired into "this shit-hole" with the expressed purpose, not of just leading a strike, but of leading the "masses of workers" in struggle against the capitalist bosses. It's also true, however, that, at best, the wildcat's start caught them by surprise, and their every effort thereafter was directed at catching up with, and regaining "leadership" over, the radical activity of the workers.

A full alphabet soup collection of communist organizers has come and gone at the Warren Truck Plant. Aspiring working class leaders have come from CL (Communist League), NCLC (Labor Committee), RU, DTRUM (a CL project), MCLL (Motor City Labor League), the Spark, and other obscure leftist sects.

These organizers share the basic view that the working class, in particular the industrial working class, is the only segment of capitalist society capable of overthrowing capitalism itself and constructing a socialist society in its place. They also believe, however, that workers cannot properly evolve their own critical analysis of capitalist society, nor any tactics or strategies to radically transform it, but must have them injected in from outside the class.

It is no coincidence that each of these groups sees itself as the only one capable of injecting the Marxist analysis and Leninist tactics necessary (competition is fierce); it's also no coincidence that each sees the necessity for a strong, centralized leadership to direct the workers' revolt, which they are more than willing (most are insistent) to provide, in the form of an authoritarian, hierarchical party. This

party would also take on the task of administering the new society, after the overthrow of capitalism, in the name of the workers.

The Revolutionary Union conforms to this simplified model (its particular wrinkle being the application of the thoughts of Mao Tse Tung) and is probably the one which has related to the truck plant over the longest period of time. Of its active members, Smith has been most visible.

In the aftermath of the strike, many Truck Plant workers are asking themselves and others the question, "Just what is this communist conspiracy shit all about?" Some background information on the RU's activities in the plant should 1) dispel any illusions that the uprising was a contrived effort by communists, and 2) touch on some of the real doubts that people feel about political missionaries, doubts that cannot be dismissed by avoiding them.

During the winter of 1971-1972 a number of young white workers came together in the plant to explore means of fighting the company. Some of them, including Smith (who was a spot-welder at the time and a member of the RU), saw themselves as communist organizers attempting to participate in, promote, and guide worker organization and rebellion against the company, and against capitalist society in general.

The upcoming delegate elections for the 1972 UAW Constitutional Convention provided the group with a vehicle for action, and when no one else was forthcoming as a volunteer, Smith ran for delegate on a radical platform, qualitatively different from the other union bureaucrats.

The response surprised all, as he came in seventh and qualified as a full delegate to the convention. Shocked by the support that a long-haired young radical had gotten in the delegate elections, (especially from the greatly more militant "second generation" workers), the union pulled what proved to be, for them, a brilliant political move: they appointed Smith second shift chief steward in the metal shop. By isolating him as a union bureaucrat from the production workers on the shop floor, the union machine thought their cooptation move was successful, and to a large extent it was. Smith now admits that it was probably a mistake for him to accept the position two years ago.

Meanwhile, the group was continuing its other activities and began putting out a newsletter called *On The Line*. Smith and other members of the Revolutionary Union exercised very tight editorial control over the content, refusing any criticism of the union, any mention of sabotage, or anything that ultimately challenged industrial authority. They claimed to know best what the workers could read, write, and for that matter, think.

As nearly everybody lost interest and fell away from the newsletter, a debate broke out among those remaining who had been around since the beginning. One worker on the motor station demanded that a campaign be mounted to

push for democracy in the union, since that seemed to him the issue causing most discontent with the union among workers. The RU people opposed this vehemently. They maintained a strict position against democracy, insisting that militant “leadership” was more important.

The argument, however, proved to be at best futile. Most workers continued to relate to the union for what it was: a labor relations arm of the company and not a “workers’ organization.”

The newsletter petered out from lack of participation, and the militants who had wanted to reform the union became isolated and fired one by one. (One was fired when caught walking back in after a heat walkout, another for refusing to pick up a washer he had dropped on the floor, and another for sabotaging trucks while three foremen looked on.) Eventually Smith himself began to feel isolated in his bureaucratic role, even though some organizing was beginning to take place in the metal shop.

Then came the strike, and the communists were caught entirely off balance, for they were unable, until the last moment, to impose their conception of the “necessary organization” on the workers’ activity.

But it was not for want of trying. When it was suggested that a more representative leadership was needed for the strike, Smith appointed a steering committee in line with his position against democracy. On at least two occasions, Smith and other RU people tried to get the strikers to vote to exclude all literature except that which had been approved, i.e., their own. Smith maintained that somehow this other literature might “hurt our efforts”.

The strikers overwhelmingly rejected the censorship efforts, maintaining that they were quite able to read and make decisions for themselves, a view not shared by their aspiring leaders.

It was only at the last meeting that the RU people actually began to make their presence felt to any extent. It was suggested at this meeting that the strikers make a strategic retreat and go back to work with a plan to continue rebellion inside the plant, since it was doubtful with such small numbers that they could prevent Chrysler from starting up production in the morning. This suggestion was vehemently opposed from two sides. Those workers who were fired opposed the suggestion for obvious reasons it left them out, and by pushing for continuance of the strike effort, they had nothing to lose and their jobs to regain, at best.

Also at the meeting were about half a dozen members of the Revolutionary Union who didn’t work at the plant but were arguing very strongly to continue the strike. As people drifted away from the meeting, discouraged and beaten, the RU people took a more insistent position, urging those remaining into what turned out to be a mistake. The next morning more people were arrested, Chrysler managed to start production and the strike effort was beaten in a rout.

What happened at that meeting was a logical, but not inevitable outcome of the way all previous meetings had been conducted. From the start strikers had accepted the participation of outsiders in the struggle, and this was a major step forward from the isolation which had marked other wildcats in the past. But it had also left the door open for the professional organizers to abuse that privilege. Also the fired workers came forward as a leadership force in decision making, pushing for the most radical action long after it was against the interests of those who must eventually return to work.

The eventual domination these groups gained was one reason so many people drifted away from the strike effort at that point. They recognized That life would still go on and the rebellion no longer spoke realistically to the needs of those still with jobs.

Lest the emphasis on self appointed leaders seem out of proportion, one thing should be emphasized: the Dodge Truck uprising was begun, continued, and ended by the workers, with only minor influence by organizers. The real leaders of the strike were the 100 to 500 people who hammered out strategies in the strike meetings or marched the picket lines to keep the plant down. During the strike we shed our passivity. Six-thousand people voted with their feet to carry on the strike, and when that effort appeared exhausted, they voted with their feet and returned to work, where they must continue the fight just to survive.

The Unions

The American auto industry, in capitalist economic terms, is a dying industry. This is not an exaggeration or simplification, nor does it mean that, if capitalism persists, it will “disappear” at any time in the foreseeable future. But, having expanded to fill almost every crevice of its potential market in this country, auto production today is simply no longer a “growth” industry and cannot hope to be again. Despite enormous yearly sales figures, real profits on each car produced have fallen and returns on investments, where they aren’t declining, are barely remaining the same.

To economic analysts this means that GM, Ford, Chrysler and American Motors can no longer generate or attract the investment capital necessary to update the technology of auto production. Instead they must continue to use outmoded facilities and production concepts while struggling vainly to increase productivity through intensive cost-cutting and speed-up. (This is true to varying degrees throughout large sections of american production industry today, where shortage of capital and large-scale shifts toward service industries have already begun to usher in their decline.)

Trapped by the huge amounts of capital they have tied up in assembly-line technology (and to some extent their own inability to conceive of production methods outside of that technology), the Henry Fords, Richard Gerstenbergs and Lynn Townsends of this country see themselves as having no choice in the situation but to press workers and facilities to their maximum productive limit. And, in this situation, they are right, for under capitalism productivity must continue to grow if an industry is to remain alive.

For workers in the plants the conclusions are unavoidable if the present state of affairs is to be maintained: 1) they must continue to work under physically oppressive conditions (decaying buildings, dangerous machines, stupefying noise levels, extremes of temperature, etc.) which must necessarily deteriorate more every day; and 2) they must continually work harder and faster under these conditions, at ever more mindless activity, with continually greater harassment from supervision.

Because of the critical necessity for continually increasing productivity, management now finds it more crucial than ever that plant facilities be made to produce their utmost at all times; thus lost-time caused by sabotage, absenteeism, wildcats and worker resistance to speed-ups must not only be avoided but actively and forcibly repressed.

This itself is nothing new in employer/employee relations: a system of rigid discipline has been indispensable to assembly-line production since its inception. But as workers become more dissatisfied with their boring and pointless activity, with their complete inability, through the officially proscribed means, to control any of the conditions which determine the consumption of their lives, their resistance turns to disruptive action and discipline becomes almost impossible to enforce. It is at this point that the disciplinary function of those organizations which traditionally purport to “represent the workers”, the unions, becomes most crucial to the continuance of commodity production.

On the face of it, the role of UAW Local 140 as a conscious agent of the Chrysler Corporation in the last month’s strike is so obvious as to hardly bear repeating. Any UAW member in the plant has painfully concluded that the union long ago gave up representing his interests and became instead a simple adjunct to the company, enforcing the work discipline that foremen and supervisors by themselves could never hope to impose. But what is important about this transformation, especially in its implications for other, supposedly more radical organizing groups bent on “leading the workers”, is that in reality it was no transformation at all, but only the logical and inevitable result of contradictions inherent in the nature of any organization which claims to “represent” the interests of others. Unions are not now essentially “healthy” organizations which require only a cleaning-up

of leadership to “begin once again serving workers’ interests”; they have not been “betrayed” by corrupt fatcats, they are the betrayal themselves.

Unions first appeared as self-organizations of laborers for defense against the inhuman working conditions of the 19th century. Their goals were completely compatible with the capitalists wage system, but demanded reforms within it of shorter working day, pensions, decent working conditions, an end to employer arbitrariness, etc. Many of these early union demands were granted only after long and bloody struggles, but the fact is that these struggles only lasted as long as the capitalists’ failure to see the potential for cooptation within the unions. Once capital accepted the inevitability of their existence and began looking for ways to assimilate them the unions’ total bankruptcy was guaranteed.

The modern union movement has its origins in the depression, and many old timers and traditional radicals look back on those years as the “good old days” of unions, when sharp battles were fought and unions at last won recognition from the companies. But the militant history and the spirit of the rank and file often tend to obscure what the actual process of unionization was and what has become its ultimate product.

As the depression sharpened in the early thirties, so did working class struggles against wage cut-backs, plant closings and unemployment. In several cities, armed battles were fought by striking workers against police and national guardsmen called up to protect the interests of the corporations. In others, general strikes of the whole work force were called and a fever of genuine revolution began spreading.

Growing working class militancy severely heightened the concern of the major capitalists as economic conditions grew worse, and in 1935 the Roosevelt government’s National Recovery Administration issued the Henderson Report, stating that “unless something is done soon, they (the workers) intend to take things into their own hands.”

That “something” became the CIO, which, encouraged by Roosevelt and his friends in the labor movement, organized rebellious workers into the topdown bureaucratic organizations that exist today. With a new government approved status under its belt, the CIO-group of unions began a series of lightning organizing drives in the basic industries with the sole objective being recognition of the union by the corporation. Swept aside were rank and file demands for control of production on the shop floor, with even union radicals discarding their previously intransigent demands for socialism. The goal, instead, became “the Contract”.

From the day the first, historic contract was signed the union took on a role no one in the rank and file had anticipated, that of disciplinarian of the work force. By its very existence the union contract establishes the power of the union as the official and only representative of the workers and as such it is recognized

by the company and the law. The contract's first concrete act is to remove from the hands of the workers the most important weapon they have, the strike, and turn it over, by law, solely to their representatives. Thus the union alone has the right to strike, not the workers. The trade-off in this agreement, of course, is that management will grant certain economic concessions in return for which the union pledges that it will prevent strikes or disruption of production during the term of the contract (in further return for which management makes the unwritten guarantee that it will do everything within its considerable power to "perpetuate and reinforce" the union leaders' privileged positions).

Since workers are continually in revolt against working conditions, speed-ups, health and safety hazards, the monotony of production (in fact all those things which drove them to self-organization in the first place), whereas the union's function and legal obligation is to insure that production continues at a normal rate regardless of worker grievances, the two groups find themselves holding interests which are not just incompatible but totally contradictory. Thus whenever workers begin a strike themselves, or any disruptive self-activity, they are faced with the combined efforts of the company, state and unions to smash it.

When conventional methods of urging workers back to work (calls for "proper procedure", promises of later action, etc.) failed to end the wildcat at Dodge Truck, the corporation had recourse to the powers of the state to settle its grievance. Having already bought the workers' right to strike from their legally recognized representatives in the 1973 contract negotiations, Chrysler had only to invoke the contractual clauses which dealt with the unauthorized strikes to bring "the laws and all the machinery of state" down on the backs of Chrysler employees. Picketing workers were confronted with the astonishing sight of a black-robed judge, surrounded by police, dispensing injunctions and ordering arrests from the back of a company-owned pickup truck in the plant parking lot. It's difficult to conceive of a more honest demonstration of the law's true bias than this, for how many Chrysler employees can remember the last — or any — judge who appeared on the shop floor demanding an end to worker harassment by the company, hazardous conditions, forced overtime, etc.?

The union's activities were equally blatant; far from taking the workers' grievances before the law when the company failed to comply with its contractual obligations, the UAW called in the local police to eject striking workers from their own union hall when they attempted to keep it open for a strike meeting.

Today, the true role of the union has become so clear as to be transparent. Unions are not institutions established to bring benefits to their members through such instruments as the contract, they are institutions which serve the interests of a class of bureaucrats and "leaders" by performing a function indispensable to contemporary corporate capitalism: the regularization of the sale of labor power.

Just as Chrysler is part of the auto monopoly, the UAW has a monopoly on the sale of labor in that market, on who is hired, under what conditions they will work, and under what circumstances they can be fired. (In terms of working conditions, their control is negative, since all they are really capable of “gaining” for workers is economic benefits.)

The larger the giant monopoly and conglomerate corporations loom in the economy, the more the unions come to identify with them and see their role as serving the greater “national interest”. Thus they can’t possibly demand the improvement of working conditions because such improvements must necessarily hinder the effort to squeeze ever greater productivity from workers and machines.

If any illusions remain, for instance, about the possibility of true “voluntary overtime” after the debacle of last year’s contract negotiations, workers need only listen to the words of Henry Ford II, commenting recently on the future of “his” industry: “I think it is inevitable in this country that we are going to have a shorter work week, but we are not ready for it — not in three years, and not in six years.” His reasoning? It would reduce productivity, and reduced productivity runs counter to the national interest.

The factory scene by its very nature as mass work situation, gives rise to collective expressions of resentment against the work process. Angry views are exchanged, ideas for resistance are spread, sabotage takes place, caucuses are formed, newsletters are distributed, radical literature mysteriously appears. The union’s response is to act as swiftly against these activities as the company; they conspire with the company to fire militant or radical workers they cannot assimilate, literature is prohibited, workers who plan actions against the company are threatened, and finally, union goon squads armed with clubs force people to work and beat up radicals. In short, the unions function as semi-official agencies of the state; as auxiliary organs of the corporation. They cannot do otherwise if they are to survive and maintain their power.

Corporate awareness of this relationship is evident from the shop floor to the uppermost echelons, as was made clear by the situation during the 1970 GM strike, when the company made the Blue Cross payment for the near-bankrupt UAW. In May of that same year, just a few months before the disastrous GM walk-out, UAW president Walter Reuther was killed in an airplane crash. Upon hearing the news, Virgil Boyd, Chrysler vice-chairman, told the New York Times, “It’s taken a strong man to keep the situation under control. I hope that whoever his successor is can exert strong internal discipline.”

The Left

The exertion of strong internal discipline is not exclusively the trademark of a smoothly- running union bureaucracy; there are other aspiring representatives and organizers dusting off their plans for the working class who are also espousing the benefits of discipline and the need for a centralized, hierarchical authority to “carry the workers’ struggle forward.”

These self-styled revolutionary communists (RU, CL, MCLL, NCLC, etc.) who assemble under the general heading Marxist-Leninist have taken upon themselves the task of organizing and leading the “workers’ struggle” with their eventual goal being a revolutionary transformation of society and the establishment of their version of communism.

What these Marxist-Leninists all share, basically, is a model for the successful seizure of state power extracted from the life and writings of V. I. Lenin, in particular his *What is to be Done?* and *State and Revolution*. This model asserts that capitalism, by forming a working class of the majority, whose labor is exploited by the minority, creates the seeds of its own destruction; once capitalism begins to outlive its historical usefulness, the exploited must inevitably rise up and destroy all the conditions of its exploitation. What it further maintains, though, is that workers as a mass are incapable of developing a consciousness of their situation beyond the point of trade unionism and reformism.

According to these groups, it is necessary then for the unformed revolt of the workers to be given shape, to be organized, from outside the class, by the vanguard party, a tightly disciplined hierarchical organization of Marxist revolutionaries. Such an organization will direct the efforts of the “undisciplined workers” and, in the event of a successful revolution, will thereafter lead in the construction of a temporary workers’ state, which will take possession of all the means of production (factories, equipment, etc.) after their seizure from the capitalist owners. This, as their model for revolution holds, is the first step in transforming the private ownership of the productive means into social ownership.

What is supposed to follow is the first stage of communism, in which the necessity remains (temporarily) for the continuance of this state, administered by the party, to insure the survival of the dictatorship of the proletariat (working class) against the threats of counterrevolutionary forces. The party, as the official manifestation of the state, will then rule in the name of the working class. The state itself, as the need for its control and direction declines (as workers, through Marxism-Leninism, become fully able to direct their lives and social production themselves), will eventually wither away and disappear entirely when true communism is attained. At that point human beings will use their more-than-

sufficient productive power solely to meet their needs, without the mediation of profit, exploitation or the arbitrary demands of commodity production and consumption.

The concept of a state “withering away” is absurd, and history has born out the absurdity of it every time a leninist state has been established. In every instance a hierarchically arranged bureaucratic elite has sprung up to replace the old capitalist owners, and far from relinquishing control of the state, their project has been to expand the bureaucracy until its centralized control enters into every aspect of daily life.

Under these so-called “communist states” the exploitation of workers remains essentially unchanged, except that now their productive labor is exploited not by individual capitalist owners but by the entire state. This state does not rule in the name of the workers, it cannot and it is ridiculous to maintain that it does. The state rules in its own name for its own interests; it is an institution of authority which, like the union, is completely external to the interests of the workers and is in fact the embodiment of all their lost self-powers. In its worst form, perfected by Joseph Stalin in the USSR during the thirties, it is little more than a total terror machine, capable of eradicating millions in the name of resisting counterrevolution.

To believe that an entrenched bureaucratic elite with power over this immense state-corporation is going to willingly surrender that power and privilege for the common good requires a monumental act of blind faith, because it flies in the face not only of simple common sense, but of all the history of the last 50 years.

The leninist organizations have found in their unsuccessful attempts to organize their base for a mass movement, that for some odd reason, no one is following them. Many of them around the country are presently emerging from a period of intensive “workerist” activities over the past few years in which their members attempted to go to the people in the plants and work with them in an effort to build the base for a mass workers’ movement. During that time, some of them (RU included) flirted with attempts to reach workers through involvement in the unions, mostly by seeking positions and by calling for the ouster of the “corrupt fatcats.”

It’s no coincidence that, while workers were discarding unions as completely opposed to their interests, the leninists still clung to them as somehow useful and seemed to have learned nothing about their essential nature in terms of whose interests they actually serve.

The attempts to organize workers into unions, transform unions, and assume leadership of these “mass organizations”, as leninists refer to them, have failed miserably. What they fail (or refuse) to see about trade unions is exactly what they fail (refuse) to see about themselves; the corruption of leadership power is

not due to its abuse by those who hold it; the leadership power is itself the abuse. The dominion of one man over another is inherently corrupt, because, in every instance, leadership serves its own interests.

What is their response to these failures? . . . They have returned to intensive backroom study groups, emerged with manifestoes calling for the formation of the authoritarian political party, and announced that “workers will soon be seized with the spirit of party discipline.” Then the workers are supposed to follow them unquestioningly.

But workers have already begun the process of reclaiming their lost self-powers, of reclaiming their very lives from the alienating forms of capitalism and they have no interest in regaining their lives simply to turn them over to another set of aspiring leaders who offer only a more centralized model for the perpetuation of capital’s domination.

Revolution is essential if the oppressive conditions of capitalism are to be ended, but it can only be a revolution which realizes the fullest human potential for every individual, that cannot allow for subjugation to any form of authority, whether it masquerades as “revolutionary” or not.

Conclusions

The Dodge Truck wildcat must be viewed in the context of the wildcats and factory occupations that took place during the summer of 1973. The Jefferson takeover, the Mack Stamping and Detroit Forge wildcats were each watched closely by all Chrysler workers. By culling information through the media, but mostly by word of mouth through the informal Chrysler “family” workers were able to informally evaluate and learn from these battles. Many have and the result will show as battles break out again and people build on the good points and eliminate the mistakes. The suggestions that follow are an indication of how some workers are thinking.

The experience of the wildcats has proved one thing . . . a go home strike on the outside of the plant has many weaknesses. Many people didn’t actively participate in the decision making or picketing out of a fear and doubt about the true nature of the strike. Communication in this situation is dominated by the company, the union and the commercial media, especially the latter two, acting in the interest of the former. Collective decision making is difficult because of the natural confusion arising in such a situation.

During the Dodge Truck wildcat, many people decried the lack of organization and effective communication. As pointed out above, the confusion allowed a few

people to dominate the meetings and the most important group, those who would eventually return to work, had only a minor role.

The simple fact is that a wildcat strike, by its very nature, is most likely doomed to failure. Just too many forces are arrayed against a single group of workers attempting to wield power by simply withholding their labor from their employer.

The wildcat strike of June was without a doubt the largest continuous and organized effort to combat the corporation yet attempted at the Truck Plant. But even though it is the most visible, it is not the only battle in the permanent war between workers on one side, and work and its representatives, the company and the union, on the other side.

A simple walkout has become a relatively common occurrence at the plant, since the beginning of the second shift two years ago. Whether a departmental walkout over issues specific to that work-group, as has happened a number of times among repairmen, metal shop and paint shop workers, or a plantwide walkout of 3,000 workers, cooked in the summer heat to the texture of soft-boiled eggs, they have all been one-shift affairs.

The small walkouts and the large ones seldom accomplish more than an immediate relief of heat, or revenge against the company for arbitrary discipline. They are a protest against the company while at the same time a recognition that they still hold ultimate sway under that roof as people troop back in for work the next day.

By carrying on resistance inside the plant, all of the disadvantages above can be overcome. At the point of production, workers are naturally organized by their collective participation in production. Communication and collective decision making can beat their highest level here.

On the shop floor, workers are in their most powerful position to slow, stop, or destroy production. Merely going home stops everything, but at the same time removes people from their source of power. Without those trucks there is no Chrysler. In addition, by holding the production process hostage, the natural organization and informal communication networks are still intact.

One of the most significant advantages to resistance inside the factory is that it leaves the workers on the inside and the company, union, or any others seeking to destroy or dominate the struggle for their own ends, on the outside, where they all belong. "Representatives" don't negotiate for the workers and then tell them when to return to work. Power is exercised on the shop floor and all must participate in it collectively.

When on each shift 50 metal shop workers left their jobs and confronted management over disciplinary action in June, they took a qualitatively different action than merely walking out. In the short run they got the discipline rescinded and

the resulting discipline from these acts led to the wildcat. Although a less frequent occurrence than a go-home walkout, this organized confrontation with management has been much more successful.

INCIDENT: If one were to imagine rising early, dressing warm and wandering into the Dodge Truck plant on a cold winter morning one would notice a scene appearing more like a Siberian work camp 40 years ago than like a modern factory. In one corner of the plant, broken windows, collapsing walls, and doors jammed open have little heat retaining capacity. When the few ceiling heater-blowers break down and the sub-zero cold blows in, production for people and some machines becomes impossible.

Eventually a few of the coldest workers will slosh out of the slush washing over their boot soles, fold their frozen wet hands into their armpits and sit down under the one working heater. Quietly, others join them until the line stops. Supervisors at first threaten write-ups and firings, but soon they and the union rep give up and go off by themselves when everyone turns their backs and refuses to talk to them. While the hands and feet of the idle workers begin to warm up, scrambling maintenance men board up windows and fix heaters and doors. Finally the foreman approaches the workers and politely asks them to see if conditions meet their approval. People return to work. The line starts again and heat is provided, at least temporarily, with no discipline.

INCIDENT: The wildcat strike had come and gone and Chrysler was getting even with its employees for being so presumptuous as to call an end to production for four days. The work schedule (nine hours, six days) seemed especially outrageous in the face of our rebellion the previous week, given that we had only been doing 40 hours up until the strike.

On the first day of production, a brief movement to walkout at the end of eight hours failed. But later that week, the line ground to a halt at precisely 2:50 p.m. on the day shift, the normal quitting time for eight hours. Circuit breakers flashed open indicating something jammed in the line while short-haired, white shirted supervisors panicked and raced to correct a very damaging situation. The beginning section of the chassis line was standing idle while the rest of the light line moved on, opening a wider and wider gap where trucks should have been.

Idle workers laid back and laughed as maintenance men and supervisors tore open a gearbox for the line driving motor and dug out a power steering pump that belonged about 75 feet further down the line. When the same incident happened at the same time on Saturday, even management was convinced that it was not an accident, but there was little they could do but fix it and curse.

Most people call it sabotage and hold varied opinions about it. A typical executive would demand to know, "Why would these workers destroy the very

means of their livelihood, it just shows what lazy, stupid, irresponsible people they are.”

A union rep might say, “If something is wrong they should go through the proper channels of the grievance procedure, otherwise it destroys the authority of their elected representatives.”

Sabotage is a way of life in any large industrial operation, especially in auto plants where the moving line dominates everything. The word itself comes from the French “sabot” meaning a wooden shoe to be thrown into the machinery. That dates back to the earliest mass production.

Sabotage is not always an individual act, nor is it random, nor is it really spontaneous. The methods are infinite and no corporation can protect itself from some angry employees who take it upon themselves to change the conditions of their jobs. A more appropriate term might be “direct action.”

It is an act of enforcing the worker’s demands on the company, not an act of petitioning a mediating authority to plead their cause. Authority resides in the power of controlling production — those who run it have it.

What do all these varied means of resistance signify? An easier way to answer that question would be to discover what they do not signify. Workers were not searching for better representation from current authorities, management and/or the union, nor were they searching for new leaders to become new bosses . . . and still go to work.

They were not looking for slight improvements in working conditions, after all it would have been easier to go out and buy their own gloves, or even drop out and live a cheap hippy life style rather than take action with such potentially tremendous social consequence.

The demands of the strike were not even formulated until the third day and even the issue of the firing of the four metal shop workers and union rep, was admitted by all to be only the spark for the uprising.

“Everything”, offered one young exuberant worker when asked what he wanted during the peak of the strike action.

“I just don’t want to work”, moaned another during the first few depressed days of the return to work after the strike.

Horrors! How do you formulate these demands into a political program. During the strike, many people railed on Watergate, the fuel crisis, inflation, the UAW sell-outs, and the “system” in general as well as specific grievances about the factory. The rejection of that job’s domination of our lives and the political content of the uprising were inseparable from the protest over working conditions. They did in fact comprise the core of the anger.

The Dodge Truck uprising and the day-to-day acts of resistance against the work process can have only one underlying cause: a generalized rebellion against

forced wage labor. The implicit realization constantly confronts us that daily activity at the work place consists of bought and sold labor, activity controlled by the rich and powerful for their purposes and that much of the value created through wage labor is given to far-away stockholders rather than the producers.

Work under capitalism will continue to distort our lives and rob us of its potential until rebellion spreads throughout the entire class of those who must sell their labor each day. The destruction of capitalist social relationships would mean the opening of a new world where work, art, creativity and even hobbies would lose their status of separate categories and be merged into one, all at the command of each individual. Capitalism doesn't work for us and each day is powerful testimony to that. The Dodge Truck strike gave us a glimmering of what can be done. Let's do it all.

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Various Authors
Wildcat: Dodge Truck June 1974
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