

GM Never Surrendered: Antiunion Politics on Auto Industry Shop Floors during the 1960s

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Abstract

The organizing victories of the United Automobile Workers (UAW) in the automobile factories of the 1930s and 1940s heralded major working-class wins over employers' antiunion practices during the early-to-mid twentieth century. Autoworkers' triumphs in Flint, Detroit, and Dearborn, at the large factories of General Motors, the Ford Motor Company, and the Chrysler Corporation signaled a high water mark for organized labor and pointed to a momentous break with the past, as organized workers had now imposed on industrial employers a new balance of power and a new semblance of democracy in what were now unionized plants. Labor and working-class historians' master narratives of the labor movement in the twentieth-century auto industry most frequently consider the theme of antiunion measures as a set of wrongs that reside in the industry's brutal past and were significantly checked by unionization from below. However, this paper peers behind the doors of the unionized shop in an effort to highlight some of the ongoing, everyday presence of antiunion culture and its forms in auto industry workplaces, including the UAW's main base of strength: Michigan. This paper focuses on 2 factories in the GM system -- General Motors' Pontiac division plant in Pontiac, Michigan; and the Chevrolet Van Nuys, California, plant in the 1960s. As post-World War II conflicts at Pontiac and Van Nuys over managers' treatment of committeemen and their handling of bulletin boards for the union reveal, antiunion politics and culture on auto industry shop floors outlasted the labor wars of the 1930s and 1940s. Perhaps General Motors never surrendered: The shop floors of unionized auto plants continued to be battlegrounds over the status and presence of organized labor, as a selection of post-World War II National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) cases and surviving UAW records demonstrate.

The organizing victories of the United Automobile Workers union (UAW) in the auto factories of the 1930s and 1940s heralded major working-class gains over employers' antiunion practices during the early-to-mid twentieth century. Autoworkers' triumphs in Flint, Detroit, and Dearborn, at the large factories of General Motors, the Ford Motor Company, and the Chrysler Corporation, between 1937 and 1945 signaled a high water mark for organized labor and pointed to a historic break with the past, as organized workers had now imposed on industrial employers a new balance of power and a new semblance of democracy in what were now supposed to be unionized plants. Labor and working-class historians' master narratives of the labor movement in the twentieth-century auto industry most frequently consider the theme of antiunion measures as a set of wrongs that reside in the industry's sordid and brutal

past and were significantly checked by unionization from below.¹ While discussions of antiunion culture and practices re-emerge in analyses of the auto industry's later turn to the union-free labor markets of the southern United States and the global South,² scholars' approaches to antiunion practices in the auto industry have neglected the persistence and the forms of antiunion culture on the shop floors of unionized auto plants in the post-World War II years.

Beyond the auto industry, more generally in labor and working-class historians' examinations of antiunion culture and politics, there is a similar tendency to locate antiunion practices in unorganized workplaces and the contested union drives to organize these sites. As several of these studies suggest, the significance of antiunion culture is presumed to end with the unionization of unorganized workplaces, more specifically the beginning of contractual relations, and/or the failure of organized labor to unionize workers in these disputed places.³ At the same time, labor and working-class historians rightly point to the presence (and even the prevalence) of antiunion politics in the legislative halls of government where antiunion conservatives wield considerable influence, as well as journalism and print media where pundits, media moguls, and political hacks vociferously promote an antiunion culture that forcefully derides the labor movement.⁴

¹ For evidence of this master narrative among labor historians who have written about the auto industry, see Sidney Fine, *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-1937* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969); Nelson Lichtenstein, Susan Strasser, and Roy Rosenzweig, *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture, and Society, Volume 2: 1877 to the Present* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 439-440, 443-444; Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), esp. 50-51; Stephen H. Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation: Mercenaries and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), esp. 171-227; Steve Meyer, *Manhood on the Line: Working-Class Masculinities in the American Heartland* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016). On the concept of master narratives, see Cinthia Salinas and Brooke Blevins, "Critical Historical Inquiry: How Might Pre-Service Teachers Confront Master Historical Narratives?" *Social Studies Research & Practice* 9:3 (2014): esp. 36.

² On General Motors' post-World War II "southern strategy," see Karsten Hulsemann, "Greenfields in the Heart of Dixie: How the American Auto Industry Discovered the South," in *The Second Wave: Southern Industrialization from the 1940s to the 1970s*, ed. Philip Scranton (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 219-254; Martin Halpern, *Unions, Radicals, and Democratic Presidents: Seeking Social Change in the Twentieth Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 128; On the auto industry's late-twentieth century turn towards Latin America, see Norman Caulfield, *NAFTA and Labor in North America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), esp. 148-150.

³ Timothy Minchin's *What Do We Need a Union For? The TWUA in the South, 1945-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) is an important exception, as is Peter Cole, *Wobblies on the Waterfront: Interracial Unionism in Progressive-Era Philadelphia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 59-60, 165.

⁴ On antiunion culture and practices in the twentieth century, see the various essays in Rosemary Feurer and Chad Pearson, eds., *Against Labor: How US Employers Organized to Defeat Union Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Lawrence Richards, *Union-Free America: Workers and Antiunion Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Chad Pearson, *Reform or Repression: Organizing America's Anti-Union Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press,

Seeking to place this conversation among labor historians in lesser-known terrain, this paper peers behind the doors of the unionized shop in an effort to highlight some of the ongoing, everyday presence of antiunion culture and its forms in auto industry workplaces, including the UAW's main base of strength: Michigan. This paper focuses on 2 factories in the GM system -- General Motors' Pontiac division plant in Pontiac, Michigan; and the Chevrolet Van Nuys, California, plant in the 1960s. As post-World War II conflicts at Pontiac and Van Nuys over managers' treatment of committeemen and their handling of bulletin boards for the union reveal, antiunion politics and culture on auto industry shop floors outlasted the labor wars of the 1930s and early 1940s. Perhaps, General Motors never surrendered: the shop floors of unionized auto plants of the postwar years continued to be battlegrounds over the status and presence of organized labor, as a selection of post-World War II National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) cases and surviving United Automobile Workers records demonstrate.

Who put GM factory managers on this intensely antagonistic path? Did top-tier executives command their subordinates to push the union out of the plants? Since General Motors company records are not available to the public, it is difficult to establish the stances of management. However, the available evidence found in union records suggests that General Motors labor relations officials and foremen on the shop floor surely wanted to ensure reliable and steady work on their assembly lines, and were thus probably determined to press the union to uphold its many contractual obligations in this era of unionized labor relations. What frustrated supervisors most in these years was the fact that autoworkers were not always reliable and acquiescent employees: sometimes choosing to be absent from their shifts and their posts; imbibing alcoholic drinks and other drugs before and during their time spent on the job;

2016); Tula A. Connell, *Conservative Counterrevolution: Challenging Liberalism in 1950s Milwaukee* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen's Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2009); Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Elizabeth Fones-Wolf and Kenneth Fones-Wolf, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Postwar South: White Evangelical Protestants and Operation Dixie* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Minchin, *What Do We Need a Union For?*; Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*; Kim Phillips-Fein, "Business Conservatism on the Shop Floor: Anti-Union Campaigns in the 1950s," *Labor: Studies in Working Class History* 7:2 (2010): 9-26; David Witwer, "Westbrook Pegler and the Anti-Union Movement," *Journal of American History* 92 (2005): 527-552; Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, "Origins of the Conservative Ascendancy: Barry Goldwater's Early Senate Career and the De-Legitimization of Organized Labor," *Journal of American History* 95 (2008): 678-709; Colleen Doody, *Detroit's Cold War: The Origins of Postwar Conservatism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

fighting with co-workers; engaging in horseplay; complaining endlessly to union bureaucrats and shop stewards about working conditions, rates of pay, seniority rules, managerial treatment, etc.⁵ The managerial staff at GM's factories regularly grappled with what must have been, for them, frustrating union rules that precluded the outright firing and punishment of substandard but unionized workers; they also struggled to force union officials (who were sometimes difficult to work with in their own right) to get the autoworkers in their charge to diligently do their work. Nonetheless, anti-union politics on the shop floors at General Motors seemed to have less to do with the directives of upper management and more to do with the personal feelings and tangible hostility of low-level company officials themselves, the staff members that dealt everyday with the union and its rules and officials inside the GM empire. Autoworkers themselves frequently noted the evident contempt General Motors officials on the factory floor seemed to wield. For instance, an estimated 2,400 autoworkers at a GM plant in California abruptly walked off the job in June 1968, when a vocal and opinionated foreman expressed his own outright satisfaction that Sen. Robert Kennedy had been assassinated. "He got what he deserved," the foreman told workers in the cushion shop, who angrily walked off the job in protest. This single incident suggests that General Motors foremen's and officials' politics and personal feelings could decidedly shape labor relations in the shop, speaking and acting as they often did without any apparent commands from top company leaders.⁶

A sustained and well-documented period of intense labor-management conflict on GM shop floors began with a late-1950s complaint to the National Labor Relations Board filed by Pontiac UAW committeeman Wallace R. O'Neil. In retaliation for an unauthorized walkout of machine repairmen on the third shift and committeeman O'Neil's failure to force them back to work, General Motors management swiftly fired O'Neil in 1959 for not fulfilling his contractual duty to enforce the union's negotiated no-strike promise in the UAW-GM contract; managers later adjusted the punishment to a 30-

⁵ Meyer, *Manhood on the Line*, esp. 194-209; Ben Hamper, *Rivethead: Tales from the Assembly Line* (New York: Warner Books, 1991).

⁶ "Slur on Kennedy Death Spurs a GM Walkout," *New York Times*, 7 June 1968, 24.

day disciplinary layoff. The Wallace R. O'Neil case highlights that while the darkest days of anti-labor terror – with its secretive labor spies, callous strikebreakers, and marauding police forces -- may have been over at General Motors, there remained the presence of harassment and subterfuge that was antiunion in its tone and outcomes. In the brave new world of contractual labor relations in the postwar auto industry, supervision and union officials continued to struggle over the status and power of organized labor in these workplaces of the post-sit down era unionized shop.

Wallace R. O'Neil's battle with GM management began as a result of his co-workers' frustrations with mandatory overtime on the weekend of April 11, 1959, and their subsequent refusal to work. On Friday, April 10, the repairmen observed that their bosses posted a notice stating they would be required to work extra time on the evening of Saturday, April 11, for a total of 6.5 hours, provoking an impromptu strategy session among the men that included their committeeman, Wallace O'Neil. During the "unhappy" talk among workers about the obligatory overtime, O'Neil later claimed he told them "they had better come in or they would be subject to penalty," in accordance with the UAW-GM contract. While O'Neil insisted he thought the men's refusal to work was "left up in the air," the other men stated they had a "general understanding" that no one would stay overtime on Saturday night.⁷ The next day, as the end of the third shift approached, all of the repairmen began punching out and exiting quickly for the parking lot. When the General Motors master mechanic, William Killen, ordered the men to stay, "they refused to do so." Killen knew of their frustration with the mandatory overtime hours, so he immediately notified the assistant personnel director at the Pontiac plant, Joseph H. Shimmick, that a "concerted refusal" to work was underway. Later, as Killen and another manager circulated the area and tried to convince the men to remain, they were curtly refused by all of them. One claimed he had to meet his spouse at the factory gate so he could be driven home; another claimed he was feeling ill.⁸

As Joseph Shimmick of the personnel office spoke to master mechanic William Killen on the

⁷ Pontiac Motors Division, General Motors Corporation and Wallace R. O'Neil, NLRB Decision and Order, 132 NLRB No. 11, 25 July 1961, p. 420, pdf available at www.nlr.gov/search/cases, accessed 2 February 2015.

⁸ General Motors Corporation and Wallace R. O'Neil, p. 420.

phone, Killen called over Wallace O'Neil to explain the situation himself. O'Neil continued to claim there was nothing he could do since all of the men were leaving work too abruptly and quickly (as they did every night). O'Neil himself soon left to go home, insisting he had done everything that he could to keep the men on the job. While on the phone, Shimmick had instructed Killen to "watch O'Neil to see what, if anything, he did." According to Killen, now an improvised labor spy for the GM personnel office, O'Neil failed to help get the men to stay for the overtime shift; supposedly, "he made no effort to get the men back to work."⁹

Immediately, management moved against O'Neil. Pontiac supervisors -- including William Killen and Robert Schons, a General Motors Labor Relations official -- interviewed each of the repairmen on Monday, April 13. They learned that all of the men had decided to quit work before the start of the overtime shift for "personal reasons"; most significantly, according to Killen and Shimmick, each of the men claimed that O'Neil "did not request or order any of the men to work over." Twenty-four hours passed. During the evening of Tuesday, April 14, GM managers then met with O'Neil, queried him about the events of the previous Saturday, and abruptly fired him at the end of the meeting. When O'Neil asked to see the information that had been gathered during the managers' interviews with the repairmen, interviews that said he had not fulfilled his contractual obligations, Killen refused to share the details. The firing took place on the order of assistant personnel director Joseph Shimmick, who had briefly consulted with Schons and Killen during a break in their April 14 interview with O'Neil.¹⁰

O'Neil responded by rushing to gather statements from his fellow co-workers and immediately filing a grievance (Wednesday, April 15), sending his case to the UAW shop committee and plant management for adjudication.¹¹ The case required 2 days of meetings. Company officials maintained that the committeeman was guilty of "negative leadership" during the repairmen's apparent walkout on

⁹ General Motors Corporation and Wallace R. O'Neil, p. 420-421.

¹⁰ General Motors Corporation and Wallace R. O'Neil, p. 422.

¹¹ Wallace R. O'Neil's handwritten notes on small pieces of paper are found in Box 12, Folder 31, UAW Region 1B Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan (UAW1B-WPRL hereafter).

April 11. O'Neil quietly acquiesced, however, at this point hoping to save his job. He accepted the punishment of a 30-day disciplinary layoff. "O'Neil did not protest the settlement," according to the Trial Examiner of the National Labor Relations Board. But after he had time to think about his predicament, he was likely quite distressed by the fact that his co-workers' punishments (they had been issued 1 week suspensions for their refusal to work) were reduced to only 3 days. For Wallace R. O'Neil, he surely must have felt that he was on the receiving end of arbitrary managerial harassment that was in retaliation for other workers' actions. During the initial dispute as well as the subsequent grievance deliberations, bosses singled out O'Neil for the harshest punishments. Did they assume that the union official must have been responsible for workers deciding to walk off the job? Did they want to punish the union official in order to send a stern message to other UAW committeemen and workers that General Motors would respond bitterly to any job actions or walkouts that disrupted the workings of the UAW-GM contract and its no-strike provisions? Did O'Neil's co-workers give him up to the company in order to save their own jobs? O'Neil responded to the grievance resolution (and managers' evident antipathy) by filing an NLRB complaint on April 21, 1959.¹²

The tiny crisis at Pontiac unfolded amid a wider context of increasing tensions between the United Automobile Workers and GM in the early 1960s. Tense collective bargaining deliberations at the national level over the substance of contracts in the late 1950s and early 1960s suggested a worsening of relations between company officials and union officials. In 1958, the UAW accused General Motors executives of negotiating "in bad faith," as the expiration of the contract deadline approached and the tension-filled negotiations failed to identify any common ground. GM accused the union of not budging "significantly" from its earliest demands, vowing the company would continue to operate even if there was no contract in place. In 1961, the UAW castigated General Motors for not sharing information about its profits in order to help the union best determine the appropriate amounts for wages and benefits. The UAW filed a complaint with the NLRB regarding GM's supposed attempts to derail the negotiations. Also in 1961, the

¹² General Motors Corporation and Wallace R. O'Neil, p. 422.

United Automobile Workers and General Motors were engaged in a fiery quarrel over the union's claims to "agency shop" clauses (requiring non-union companies to pay the equivalent of union dues in the same industry) at several non-union Indiana automobile plants – a dispute that would place the matter before the Supreme Court in 1963. At multiple levels of the company and the union's relationship in the late-1950s and the early 1960s, tensions were increasing, leading to union-company squabbles in the plants, cases before the National Labor Relations Board and the Supreme Court, and harsh words exchanged and quoted in the press.¹³

The trial examiner of the National Labor Relations Board in Detroit, Reeves R. Hilton, did not sympathize with O'Neil's charge. Instead, the judge concluded that Wallace R. O'Neil was wrong to so cynically use the NLRB to collect lost wages after he had been rightly punished by General Motors for his "negative leadership in the affair." "I can find no merit or substance in O'Neil's case," Hilton wrote. "It strikes me that having rescued his job through the grievance procedure, O'Neil then decided to try his luck with the Board and attempt to collect pay for his 30-day suspension."¹⁴ Looking at the conflicting claims of GM and Wallace O'Neil, the trial examiner concluded that O'Neil had a serious duty to actively prevent his co-workers from walking off the job against the wishes of management; Hilton concluded that O'Neil was guilty of not upholding and enforcing his union's contractual obligations, as management was entitled to expect from its relationship with the UAW. Hilton disregarded any suggestion of antiunion (or at least anti-unionist) animus on the part of the company.

That Reeves R. Hilton assumed the worst of Wallace R. O'Neil in his role as committeeman at General Motors in Pontiac suggests the deepening cultural and political influence of anti-labor conversations in government and the press during the late-1950s and early 1960s. In particular, as historians David Witwer and Joseph E. Hower point out, more and more politicians and journalists viewed

¹³ "GM is Unshaken By New Union Bid," *New York Times*, 29 May 1958, 15; "GM Is Accused By Auto Workers," *New York Times*, 24 August 1961, 26; "US Seeks Ruling on Agency Shops," *New York Times*, 2 September 1962, 41; "Agency Shop Accord Set By GM and Auto Union," *New York Times*, 13 June 1963, 51.

¹⁴ General Motors Corporation and Wallace R. O'Neil, p. 424.

the institutions of organized labor as increasingly corrupt, authoritarian, and even criminal.¹⁵ Hilton's blunt refusal to validate O'Neil's claims rested on his own presumption that the union official in the shop must be lying about his actions.¹⁶

The NLRB members, however, overturned Reeves Hilton's dismissal of the case in a 2 to 1 decision. Plainly summarizing the case, the Board pointed to the antiunion feelings that guided GM's and Hilton's views of O'Neil's actions: "O'Neil, who was not personally involved in the dispute about overtime, was requested by company officials to persuade the men to return to work. O'Neil replied that the request came too late for him to effectuate it. Yet as he left the premises, he spoke to several repairmen individually and informed them that he had been reminded by the Employer of his duty as a committeeman, and that they should return to work. As a result of his failure to persuade the men to return to work, O'Neil was discharged by Respondent for violating the 'no-strike' clause of the contract. O'Neil immediately filed a grievance, which was carried to step 2 of the contract grievance procedure. The grievance was settled by the reduction of O'Neil's discharge to a 30-day 'disciplinary layoff.'" ¹⁷ The Board concluded that Wallace O'Neil "neither caused nor took part in the work stoppage of the machine repairmen," ordering that General Motors must revoke the suspension and pay him the wages he lost.¹⁸

Appointed by Pres. Dwight D. Eisenhower to the National Labor Relations Board in 1955, member Boyd Leedom, formerly of the South Dakota Supreme Court, dissented. "I would affirm the Trial Examiner and dismiss the complaint," he wrote. "O'Neil had an affirmative duty, which he failed to assume, to take positive action, as management requested, to halt the strike." Like Reeves Hilton, Leedom argued that the UAW had violated its contractual obligations to General Motors by allowing the repairmen to quit work and leave the factory. As Boyd Leedom wrote in his dissent, "The...Union will

¹⁵ David Witwer, "The Chapter Left Untold: Labor Historians and the Problem of Union Corruption," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* 8:2 (2011): 39; Joseph E. Hower, "Big Brother Unionism? The Landrum-Griffin Act and the Fight for AFSCME's Future, 1961-1964," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* 11:2 (2014): esp. 66.

¹⁶ General Motors Corporation and Wallace R. O'Neil, p. 423.

¹⁷ General Motors Corporation and Wallace R. O'Neil, p. 414.

¹⁸ General Motors Corporation and Wallace R. O'Neil, p. 414-415.

not permit its members to cause...any strike or stoppage.”¹⁹ In light of this, GM was supposedly justified in its punishment of O’Neil.

As time passed, throughout the remainder of the 1960s, GM representatives would continue to do battle with UAW committeemen at Pontiac. Not only did they continue their fight against Wallace R. O’Neil, but surviving UAW records (such as grievance files and correspondence among union officials) contain discussions of many incidents that highlighted managers’ hopes of pushing back against the presence and power of the union, of “denying” the auto workers union the “freedom to operate and police the Agreements.”²⁰

General Motors officials’ antiunion measures during the 1960s often began with wars of words against union officials; in other words, supervisors frequently vocalized their hostility toward the UAW. For example, four workers in one unnamed department – GE Healy, William D. Rice, Dennis Petersen, and Mike Oliver -- were fed up with the antiunion tirades of their foreman named Thomas Duty, writing a short note of grievance to the UAW leadership in Detroit that complained of the foreman repeatedly exclaiming “he was going to do what he wanted and hell with the union” – that he would do whatever he could to avoid working with the United Automobile Workers.²¹ The men wanted to make sure the union knew full well of the foreman’s subversion.

Managers at General Motors in Pontiac were often verbally abusive toward UAW committeemen and workers themselves, expressing derision for union rules, union officials, and the union’s idea of shared shop floor governance. In one typical case, GM official Ralph Skrine bawled out two individuals - a worker and a UAW committeeman -- for an incident that involved a break in the workday, a newspaper, and the answering of a telephone in a management office. When worker Paul Clements stepped into an office while on break to peek at a newspaper and to help his foreman by answering the

¹⁹ General Motors Corporation and Wallace R. O’Neil, p. 416. On the membership of the NLRB over time, see <http://www.nlr.gov/who-we-are/board/members-nlr-1935>, accessed 1 May 2015. On Boyd Leedom’s tenure with the Board, see James A. Gross, *Broken Promise: The Subversion of US Labor Relations Policy, 1947-1994* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 125.

²⁰ Larry Hartman to John Maye, 24 April 1967, in Box 17, Folder 31, UAW1B-WPRL.

²¹ Grievance No. 454-577, 12 September 1967, in Box 12, Folder 32, UAW1B-WPRL.

phone, Skrine “became angry and loud” when he saw Clements in what was supposed to be management’s space. Using “harsh” language, he ordered Clements to leave. When an unnamed committeeman arrived to question Skrine about what had happened, the situation worsened. “He became angry and started to shout,” the committeeman explained to UAW leaders. “I told him that I could hear,” he said, “that it wasn’t necessary to shout.” Skrine became livid when the committeeman said that he intended to file a grievance regarding the obnoxious behavior. “I won’t be bothered with petty ass shit like this,” Skrine shouted. At one point, the committeeman thought Skrine “was going to hit me.” The union official walked away, writing up a “policy grievance” that claimed the manager was bargaining in bad faith, wrongly shouting at him, and was guilty of conduct “unbecoming a general supervisor serving in his capacity.”²² On another occasion, a labor official at GM Pontiac was so verbally abusive to the workers and committeemen in his department (“using profanity that would put the devil to shame”) that a committeeman noted he “should be sent back to school” in order to (re)learn basic manners.²³

On at least one occasion during the 1960s, a UAW committeeman complained that he had actually been physically assaulted by GM representatives. In 1965, committeeman Richard Darlting [sic] sent a telegram to Walter P. Reuther in order to ask for advice about a lawsuit against General Motors that he was planning related to the “assault and battery of my person” which he alleged was directed by members of the “Pontiac Motors Plant Protection” staff. Also, Darlting claimed that his character had been defamed, and that his superiors had slandered him. The details of the case are unclear, but Darlting pointed out to Reuther that he was a committeeman.²⁴

²² Unnumbered grievance, 1 September 1966, in Box 12, Folder 32, UAW1B-WPRL. On the day-to-day work experiences of union committeemen, though with a focus on the 1970s-1980s, see Denny Cox and Maggie Cox interview by Marilyn Coulter, John Fedewa, Cheryl McQuaid, and Jerri Smith, 23 January 2006, MP3, Lansing Auto Town Gallery, G. Robert Vince Voice Library, Michigan State University Libraries, Michigan State University, <http://www.lib.msu.edu/branches/vvl/autotown/detail>, accessed 24 November 2014; as well as Jody Frasier interview by John Fedewa, Cheryl McQuaid, Doug Rademacher, and Jerri Smith, 28 April 2006, MP3, Lansing Auto Town Gallery, G. Robert Vince Voice Library, Michigan State University Libraries, Michigan State University, <http://www.lib.msu.edu/branches/vvl/autotown/detail>, accessed 8 November 2014. This helpful collection of interviews documents workers’ experiences at the Lansing Fisher Body plant that was operated by General Motors; UAW Local 602 represented workers there.

²³ Grievance Record Att: Wayne Anable, 19 February 1968, in Box 12, Folder 31, UAW1B-WPRL.

²⁴ Richard Darlting to Walter Reuther, Telegram, 8 July 1965, in Box 12, Folder 31, UAW1B-WPRL; see also Statement of Charles E. McDonald, Jr., n.d. (1970?), in Box 69, Folder 36, UAW1B-WPRL.

At General Motors in Pontiac during the 1960s, managers there regularly interdicted union officials' efforts to help other workers and to confer with officials of the union. In July 1964, during the early morning hours of the third shift, UAW committeeman Edward Ray wrote up a tersely worded grievance regarding "management refusing my rights" to "release me from my job" to handle various workers' complaints. In the autumn of 1967, committeeman R. Comer appointed another worker (Mr. Lee) to fill in for him when he needed to be away from the plant for a day, asking the substitute to investigate several grievance cases. When Comer returned to work, he needed to consult with the substitute committeeman about the work he completed on behalf of the union. Reporting to the department where the substitute worked, and asking to speak with Mr. Lee about union business, the foreman on duty refused to allow the regular committeeman to see him. After haggling with the foreman, the boss only allowed Comer to visit with Mr. Lee for "5 or 10 minutes." Reporting on the incident to UAW leaders, Comer complained that the case was yet another example of managers' regular "harassment" of shop floor officials in the UAW.²⁵

Company officials in the shop also punished workers who called for their committeeman; this retaliation assumed several forms. In the spring of 1969, worker Robert Krug called for his committeeman when his foreman (named Page) abruptly put him on relief work – something that was "out of his classification" as an assembly line worker. "After the committeeman left," union official Kenny Karns observed in a report to the UAW leadership, "Foreman Page assigned this employee to do sanitation work." In another case, GM management reduced the relief time for a worker from 18 minutes to 12 minutes after he "called a committeeman" when the foreman put him in a job that was "out of his classification." One worker in another area reported to his committeeman that his machine was not safe – only to see the foreman reduce his relief time to 12 minutes. Foreman Ray Olsen of department 2648 in the Pontiac plant "retaliates" by putting his aggrieved workers in other work areas; and when these jilted

²⁵ Unnumbered Grievance, 2 July 1964, in Box 17, Folder 12, UAW1B-WPRL; Statement of R. Comer, 1 October 1967, in Box 17, Folder 12, UAW1B-WPRL; see also "Outline of Unresolved Issues in the Plant," 20 September 1968, in Box 12, Folder 10, UAW1B-WPRL.

workers called for the committeeman, the foreman failed to bring the union official to the worker until it was nearly time for the worker to go home.²⁶

UAW committeemen frequently complained to union leaders that GM managers were often guilty of bargaining in bad faith and breaking written agreements outright. For example, committeeman Reuben H. Mosley wrote to the UAW's GM Department director Leonard Woodcock to complain that company officials at Pontiac were in the process of nullifying a year-old written agreement they had reached with Spray Booth maintenance workers. As Mosley put it, GM would only "live up to the agreement" when "it suits them," regularly setting aside written (and negotiated) agreements in favor of its own top-down policy-making. In what was supposed to be a unionized era, of shared shop floor governance and union-management contractual relations, Mosley dismissed GM officials as "shameful in the eyes of its employees, and its union representatives."²⁷ In response to what he thought of as a pattern of managerial subversion of the UAW contract, he argued for union pressure to bring about wholesale changes to GM management at the Pontiac facility: "I Reuben H. Mosley, as the Committeeman of this shift and district in the Maintenance Dept., demand you take steps and have these irresponsible people in top Mange. [sic] reprimanded or discharged and force management, when they make an agreement in writing to live up to it."²⁸ According to shop committeeman Ed Thrasher, General Motors officials sometimes referred to the UAW-GM contract agreements as "funny books and funny papers," and the written rules which governed the plant were not "worth the paper it was wrote on."²⁹

The most common and frustrating problem that UAW committeemen at Pontiac faced in the 1960s was GM management's frequent use of paragraph 19E provisions (abuse of the grievance procedure and/or duplication of the grievance procedure) in order to try to bully union officials into inactivity and quiet on the shop floor. By the mid-to-late 1960s, the union began to collect extensive

²⁶ Report of Kenny Karns Zone #1 Shop Committeeman, 28 August 1969, in Box 16, Folder 5, UAW1B-WPRL.

²⁷ Reuben H. Mosley to Leonard Woodcock, n.d., in Box 110, Folder 3, UAW1B-WPRL.

²⁸ Mosley to Woodcock.

²⁹ "Plant #63," n.d., in Box 12, Folder 31, UAW1B-WPRL.

documentation of managers' harassment of union officials for conducting regular union business, such as the collection, investigation, and presentation of workers' grievances to management. As one union member summarized, "19E at Pontiac Motor is used as a black jack to keep committeemen in line"; another union official described the 19E rule as a company "hammer to suppress" union activity.³⁰ UAW committeemen were often written up for alleged abuse of the grievance procedure. Some cases revolved around a single instance, while other cases suggested a pattern of supervisory behavior. For instance, Robert Terry, a committeeman inside the Pontiac plant, complained that managers once gave him a 19E "reprimand" for supposedly "spending too much time" investigating grievances. He claimed this was completely false. Terry insisted that supervisors and foremen were only pursuing "something to try to horse trade with" since he was in the process of investigating several workers' grievances that, in the aggregate, accused management of "interfering and delaying grievance procedure."³¹ Committeeman Stanley Ezak testified that S. Hanna, Jr., another union official at Pontiac, "has been subject to various abuses" since he began his work on behalf of the union: "reprimanded, attempt[ed] to remove to another shift, given a 'rough time' to answer calls..., and currently given an instant 3 day disciplinary layoff." GM management was guilty of "throw[ing] the book at him." "This type of leadership (misnomer) may well be accepted under a dictatorship," Esak angrily remarked, "but not in a democracy and under the democratic principle is most profoundly protested and must be brought to an immediate halt."³²

New UAW committeemen in particular, who were unused to dealing with management as union representatives, found themselves totally overwhelmed by the many forms of pressure and intimidation. Elected committeeman in July 1967, William Gordon, Jr. complained that managers' constant intimidation had "shattered" his nerves and even led him to consider resigning from his position with the union. He explained to UAW leaders that "in practically every case I was impaired in doing my official

³⁰ Summary of Grievance, n.d., in Box 12, Folder 32, UAW1B-WPRL; "19E Notice," 7 October 1967, in Box 17, Folder 12, UAW1B-WPRL.

³¹ "Subject 19E Cases," n.d., in Box 12, Folder 32, UAW1B-WPRL.

³² Statement Re. Local 653--Pontiac Motor Negotiations (Stanley Ezak), 10 January 1968, in Box 13, Folder 4, UAW1B-WPRL.

union work.” Supervisors regularly snapped at him, followed him around the plant, would not allow him “to sit down to write a grievance,” and would not permit him to “speak to any of my friends.” If Gordon did, he claimed foremen would accuse him of a 19E violation. “They [company officials] would not act in good faith nor would they act in a businesslike manner when I discussed serious union business,” Gordon grumbled. “They were evasive; acted unconcerned; would start cracking jokes, or any other act that would tend to undermine [sic] the business at hand.”³³ As committeeman Wallace R. O’Neil himself explained in a letter to the UAW International headquarters in Detroit, whenever new UAW committeemen questioned or challenged General Motors managers, “Pontiac Management retaliates with the gift from heaven – 19E.” Word of managers’ “retaliation” against committeemen also reached reporters at the *New York Times*, who referenced the problem in a 1964 article on union grievances in GM plants in the New York/New Jersey area.³⁴

Committeeman Max Brown testified in January 1968, for instance, that several foremen he knew were rather deliberate about picking on new UAW officials. Only a committeeman for three short months in 1967, Brown confronted one foreman early on, who told him, “Well, Max, seeing as how you’re working for me today, I’ll see if I can’t find the hardest job in the Department for all those grievances you have given me.” He was assigned the heavy labor of “loading heads into the old washer.” Later on, about one month after this day of heavy labor, he found himself working in another department where the foreman was also determined to put various forms of pressure on the new committeeman. Brown observed the foreman, named Ralph Lowe, “moving cranks from one rack to another” – a job that was to be completed by workers in the Stock Handlers classification. The committeeman told Ralph Lowe that he would have to bring down someone from the plant’s Shop Committee to investigate whether or not the foreman was allowed to handle this work. As the foreman went to call the shop committeeman, he

³³ Statement Re. Local 653--Pontiac Motor Negotiations (William Gordon, Jr.), 11 January 1968, in Box 13, Folder 4, UAW1B-WPRL.

³⁴ Wallace R. O’Neil to Lawrence Hartman, 6 July 1967, in Box 12, Folder 32, UAW1B-WPRL; “UAW Shop Aides Voice Grievances,” *New York Times*, 26 April 1964, 79.

abruptly turned and said, “O.K., I’ll get your committeeman, but you’re on notice.” Max Brown asked what for, and the boss told him that he was “wasting time on the job.” “Everytime [sic] I worked in Dept. 975 after the trouble with Lowe,” he said, “I was given the worst job.” On yet another occasion, a foreman protested about Max Brown that “he [the foreman] is getting a lot of complaints about me [Brown] wasting time in the canteen area,” near the department where he usually worked. Lastly, Brown described another supervisor who “has repeatedly had foremen who work for him to keep their eyes on me and to keep me out of his area unless I am on an official call.” Reflecting on his history of troubles with GM management, Max Brown claimed, “It is no secret that management in Plant 9 will try everything they can think of to keep a committeeman under their thumb.”³⁵

Committeemen in the shop found that they could not regularly voice their concerns about safety conditions without triggering the ire of General Motors low-level administration. During the mid-to-late 1960s, for example, committeemen noticed dangerously oily floors near the #892 punch press at the Pontiac plant. There, conditions required workers to load heavy metal into the machine while walking on floors that were completely soaked with oil that had dripped from the machine. The union claimed, “It was impossible to operate the press and not get covered by this oil.” When committeeman John Crawford and another union official approached two GM foremen about the condition of the workspace around #892, the managers became irate (“in a fit of anger”) and threatened them with 19E charges. “We tried to explain the situation to them in a very reasonable manner,” Crawford and his colleague claimed, “but they kept yelling and refused to listen.” In reports to the UAW, Crawford and his colleague remarked that the latest dust-up with company supervision was actually part of a pattern of managerial resistance and intimidation whenever union officials tried to present grievances or other issues to GM officials. John Crawford accused General Foreman Kimmel of “threatening him with 19E charges almost every time he attempts to investigate a grievance.” Reflecting on the oil-soaked floors near #892, the local UAW leadership noted that “it was obvious that supervision did not want the committeeman to see deplorable

³⁵ Statement Re. Local 653--Pontiac Motor Negotiations (Max Brown), 11 January 1968, in Box 13, Folder 4, UAW1B-WPRL.

working conditions near the press and their 19E charges were created to cause a divergence. This trickery seems to work to their advantage.”³⁶

Wallace R. O’Neil and other UAW officials were harassed more and more by managers for doing their jobs -- and for their mere presence. The UAW explained that managers were guilty of what they called “bird dogging”: the constant bullying of union officials for any reason.³⁷ This harassment was often petty. Case in point: when a UAW committeeman named Robert Fitzroy entered the factory one day in August 1966, a member of management, WW Van Dyke, “immediately appeared.” When Van Dyke observed Fitzroy talking to Ed Thrasher, a UAW committeeman, he loudly ordered Fitzroy “to stop talking now! [sic] and also to stop talking to each other in the future even if other people were allowed that privilege!”³⁸ Van Dyke continued to shout at Fitzroy as he walked through various parts of the factory, including offices, telling the man he was not allowed “to enter the office at any time” and that he was forbidden to use the office telephone for union affairs or otherwise.³⁹

The committeemen at Pontiac recognized that GM managers hoped to influence (if not control) the amount of space that union officials would be allowed to work in. Proof of this occurred in February 1970, when the UAW leadership explained to the Local 653 staff that committeemen were not to be allowed by management to put up cardboard barriers inside the union’s work center in the factory. Since the work center for the union was enclosed by several large glass windows, committeemen often struggled to focus on handling grievances and complaints because their work was too easily interrupted by workers’ and managers’ constant traffic in and around the area. Friends and acquaintances of union officials often could be seen (and heard) “parading by” the work center. But most importantly, union officials claimed the need to screen their work from the prying eyes and probing ears of GM foremen and supervisors. In

³⁶ Statement of Edward R. McMorris, n.d., in Box 96, Folder 5, UAW1B-WPRL; Unsigned statement, n.d., in Box 96, Folder 5, UAW1B-WPRL.

³⁷ “Par 19-E Threat,” 19 August 1966, in Box 12, Folder 32, UAW1B-WPRL; see also Larry Hartman to Executive Board, Shop Committeemen, District Committeemen, and Alternate Committeemen, 22 September 1967, Box 96, Folder 5, UAW1B-WPRL; Unnumbered grievance, n.d., in Box 67, Folder 38, UAW1B-WPRL.

³⁸ “Par 19-E Threat.”

³⁹ “Par 19-E Threat.”

particular, low-level management often visited the work center to “raise arguments” about many issues such as workers’ pending grievances. Committeemen were constantly (and sometimes belligerently) intruded upon by company officials as they worked in the tiny but highly accessible office space. One early morning, committeemen at work confronted a GM Labor Relations department official who was reportedly “drunk, obnoxious, threatening, hollering” in the pre-dawn hours of the third shift.⁴⁰

Committeemen at Pontiac complained to UAW leaders that working conditions and the situation facing the union were “as bad as they were before the union came in,” that the factories of the CIO era too often continued to be dominated from above by antiunion employers. In the early 1960s, UAW committeeman Robert J. Bain wrote a short letter to union president Walter Reuther to ask for “help to get good working conditions and fair play back in our plants.” He explained that, in his view, he was powerless as a union committeeman to affect change in the plant since the company regularly and deliberately denied every grievance he filed. “A committeeman should have some power to stop the abuse and employees should have some respect,” he said; however, “Being a committeeman today, he is informed by management ... that he is powerless and usually regarded as a fool.” Before management would respond to any of the union’s grievances, he found that he basically needed “sworn affidavits” for every case. Bain also complained that he had to somehow “out smart” the company at every turn in order to function properly as an official for the union.⁴¹ Other union officials believed the problems in the plant were without precedent. In a report to UAW leaders about the many problems on the factory floor at GM Pontiac, committeeman Bill Bray sarcastically asked if they had seen “these prison movies where the inmates are not allowed to move from their places, and have to sneak around to wisper [sic] to each other.” He claimed that his department, Plant #51, functioned much like a prison environment: “the same conditions exist.” “Of the years I have been committeeman,” he pointedly explained, issues in the shop “weren’t ever this bad.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Larry Hartman to Frank James, 16 February 1970, in Box 16, Folder 13, UAW1B-WPRL.

⁴¹ Robert J. Bain to Walter P. Reuther, 2 April 1962, in Box 110, Folder 2, UAW1B-WPRL.

⁴² Bill Bray Shop Committee Report Zone #9, n.d., in Box 16, Folder 5, UAW1B-WPRL.

One ongoing practice that must have rankled autoworkers of the 1960s was management's use of the stopwatch to time working men and women at their jobs – a practice that harkened back to the bluntly authoritarian, sped-up automobile factories of the “pre-union” era.⁴³ UAW committeeman Robert J. Bain observed that “we have a foreman” at General Motors in Pontiac who reportedly spied on the workers throughout the plant, quietly and secretly timing them at their jobs with a stopwatch. According to Bain, the foreman treated the workers “like animals,” using the watch to intimidate these unionized workers to the fullest extent that he could. (Managers could discipline those autoworkers who failed to produce the required number of operations per shift.) “I know our agreement is being violated,” Bain said of the foreman. “I am trying to give these people good representation.”⁴⁴ On another occasion, a woman who worked at Pontiac wrote a long letter to the leadership of the UAW to complain about a similar problem in her department; however, management seemed to be targeting women workers in particular. “Supervision and Standard's men stood over us several weeks, timing us,” she wrote of the day-to-day situation in her work area. As a result of managers' timing of the workers in her department, several women workers lost their jobs due to the supposed slowness, low-quality, and inefficiency of their labor. She claimed this was the result of managers' desire to weed out the women workers in favor of men. Much to her chagrin, the union officials at Pontiac seemed unable (or unwilling) to do anything about it.⁴⁵

Wallace R. O'Neil remained a committeeman after his National Labor Relations Board case, but faced perpetual harassment from management for his attempts to fight on behalf of workers' grievances. After winning his NLRB case, GM management forced O'Neil to work alone in a small “cage” that was “so wired that a red light went on when this committeeman left his cell.”⁴⁶ Whenever O'Neil left the “cage,” foremen in the shop would practically pounce on him. They wanted to prevent him from collecting and presenting workers' grievances, which was something O'Neil did with regularity and

⁴³ On auto industry working conditions before the CIO, see Joyce Shaw Peterson, *American Automobile Workers, 1900-1933* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Meyer, *Manhood on the Line*, 12-32, 35-37.

⁴⁴ Bain to Reuther.

⁴⁵ Audrey L. Ball to Solidarity House, 12 February 1965, in Box 12, Folder 31, UAW1B-WPRL.

⁴⁶ Aby Holzberg to Leonard Woodcock, 10 August 1967, in Box 107, Folder 18, UAW1B-WPRL.

dedication.⁴⁷

But the Wallace O'Neil case of the late-1950s and 1960s was clearly only one example of GM antiunion politics on auto industry shop floors.⁴⁸ Not only did managers' persistent hostility toward UAW committeemen point to the presence of antiunion feelings among low-level supervision in the company in the postwar years, but so too did the development of contract rules in the 1950s-1960s that were negotiated and subsequently applied that strictly curtailed union politics on the shop floors of GM plants. The contested arena of contract rules highlighted the ways General Motors management continually looked for ways to blunt the politics of organized labor in its facilities, trying to relegate the labor movement to the status of a silent partner in shop floor governance.

In 1962, autoworker Paul Joseph Goldener who worked for General Motors at the Van Nuys, California, Chevrolet plant filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board in protest against contract rules that precluded worker distribution of political literature (on working and non-working time), as well as against rules that banned the posting of political information on UAW bulletin boards. Since the arrival of the United Automobile Workers at GM Van Nuys in 1948, General Motors officials only allowed union bulletin boards to be used for specific functions: e.g., notices of meetings, elections, recreational events, and information about credit unions or unemployment compensation (issues that were dubbed by the company to be "bona fide Union activity"). The wording of the rules appeared as:

(92) The plants covered by this agreement will erect bulletin boards which may be used by the Union for posting notices bearing the written approval of the President of the Local Union of [sic] the Chairman of the Shop Committee and restricted to:

- (a) Notices of Union recreational and social affairs.
- (b) Notices of Union election.
- (c) Notices of Union appointments and results of Union elections.
- (d) Notices of Union meetings.
- (e) Notices concerning bona fide Union activities such as: cooperatives;

⁴⁷ Holzberg to Woodcock.

⁴⁸ For other examples GM officials' conflicts with UAW committeemen, see General Motors Corporation and Michael McCarthy, Craig H. Livingston, and Roland Beish, NLRB Decision and Order, 218 NLRB No. 82, 16 June 1975, p. 472-480, pdf available at www.nlr.gov/search/cases, accessed 2 February 2015, which deals with shop floor conflicts at GM in Linden, New Jersey. See also Ruth Milkman, *Farewell to the Factory: Auto Workers in the Late Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

credit unions; and unemployment compensation information.

(f) Other notices concerning Union affairs which are not political or controversial in nature.

Later wordings of these rules during the 1960s and 1970s added: “The Union will promptly remove from such Union bulletin boards, upon the written request of management, any material which is libelous, scurrilous or detrimental to the labor-management relationship.”⁴⁹ Paul J. Goldener’s complaint argued that General Motors was guilty of discriminating against workers and the union by maintaining its ban of political talk. As the Board summarized in its 1963 decision and order, “the Respondent [GM] violated...the Act [Wagner Act] by maintaining in effect shop rules prohibiting employee organizational activity on company premises at any time.”⁵⁰ General Motors management contended that it could not be found responsible for discrimination since there was no evidence or complaints that any discrimination ever occurred in the Van Nuys plant. In other words, the presence of these rules could be overlooked because no problems had emerged during the course of their existence; rather, these rules were “mere formalities” that harmed no one.⁵¹

Despite this, the National Labor Relations Board responded that these rules likely stifled worker expression in the factory, that the absence of overt conflict indicates “they have operated successfully to inhibit the free exchange of ideas among employees.” Even though the UAW had surrendered workers’ right to strike in its postwar contracts with GM, the NLRB insisted that the company could not implement policies that precluded workers’ rights to engage in activity related to determining their collective

⁴⁹ See, for instance, General Motors Corporation, Delco Moraine Division, and Ellen G. Powell and International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, and its Local 696, Party to the Contract, NLRB Decision and Order, 237 NLRB No. 167, 1 September 1978, p. 1511, pdf available at <http://www.nlr.gov/cases-decisions/board-decisions>, accessed 18 March 2015. On free speech politics in twentieth-century workplaces, see Bruce Barry, *Speechless: The Erosion of Free Expression in the American Workplace* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2007).

⁵⁰ Chevrolet Motor Division, General Motors Corporation and Paul J. Goldener, NLRB Decision and Order, 144 NLRB No. 83, 26 September 1963, p. 862, pdf available at www.nlr.gov/search/cases, accessed 2 February 2015. For an introduction to factory life at GM Van Nuys, though with a focus on later periods, see Craig A. Zabala, “Sabotage at General Motors’ Van Nuys Assembly Plant, 1975-1983,” *Industrial Relations Journal* 20:1 (1989): 16-32; Frank Langfitt, “The End of the Line for GM-Toyota Joint Venture,” NPR: All Things Considered, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125229157>, accessed 25 March 2015.

⁵¹ General Motors Corporation and Paul J. Goldener, p. 865, 869. For an additional bulletin board case at GM during this period, see General Motors Corporation and Eddie Adams, NLRB Decision and Order, 147 NLRB No. 59, 18 June 1964, p. 509-515, pdf available at www.nlr.gov/search/cases, accessed 2 February 2015.

bargaining agents.⁵² The Board concluded that GM could “not maintain in effect shop rules which prohibit employees from engaging in solicitation in connection with union activities during nonworking hours on our premises, or from distributing any written material on behalf of any labor organization on nonworking time in a nonworking area.”⁵³

Despite the NLRB’s unambiguous conclusion about the bulletin boards at Van Nuys, the issue remained a problem at the Los Angeles-area factory. Paul Goldener filed a second complaint in 1966 against management’s continued formal prohibition of union and political talk in the plant, as well as managers’ attempts to closely regulate the content of union bulletin boards. As a result of the 1964 contract negotiations between the United Automobile Workers and General Motors, the rules that had been prohibited by the National Labor Relations Board in the earlier complaint had been restored in the plant; at the same time, the language had been strengthened in some areas. Under Rule 92 that covered the content of the UAW’s bulletin boards, for example, the wording of the contract noted: “The Union will promptly remove from such Union bulletin boards, upon the written request of management, any material which is libelous, scurrilous, or detrimental to the labor-management relationship.”⁵⁴ But what was “libelous” or “scurrilous?” To what extent could workers voice criticisms of their supervisors or the company? How inclusive were these rules and concepts? As they had done in the earlier era of the 1930s and 1940s, General Motors management continued to look for ways to nullify the politics of the labor movement and workers themselves inside the factory, going so far as to demand that union officials police bulletin boards for any potentially upsetting or critical political talk. In its approaches to contract deliberations, as these 1960s complaints to the NLRB suggested, GM leaders intended to defang the UAW to the fullest extent possible; the union’s voice and the many voices of its members were to be policed, minimized, and quieted.

⁵² General Motors Corporation and Paul J. Goldener, p. 866.

⁵³ General Motors Corporation and Paul J. Goldener, p. 863.

⁵⁴ General Motors Corporation and Paul Joseph Goldener, NLRB Decision and Order, 158 NLRB No. 149, 9 June 1966, p. 1725, pdf available at www.nlr.gov/search/cases, accessed 2 February 2015; see also General Motors Corporation and Eddie Adams, p. 509-515.

The National Labor Relations Board, however, missed the antiunion dimensions of General Motors' policy-making at Van Nuys, focusing instead on the need to protect workers' political rights in the shop so they could continue to question and revisit the issue of who would serve as their collective bargaining representatives in dealings with the company. Goldener was a rank-and-file dissident, as suggested by the Board's investigation. "We are keenly aware," a skeptical Board explained, "of the advantage that accrues to an incumbent union, and perhaps, to an employer, from an agreement which prohibits employees from opposing the union by using the customary and vital channel of communication proscribed by the contract under consideration." Overlooking the antiunion import of GM's contractual rules in its rebuke of the UAW's negotiation of the current contract, the Board wanted to help Goldener put a stolid incumbent union on the defensive: "the union and the employees are and remain separate entities for many purposes, and the employees by once selecting the union as their representative, do not forfeit their fundamental right to change their representative at appropriate times." Here, the National Labor Relations Board was most concerned with how to prevent incumbent unions from stifling the political voices of their memberships, missing the overall managerial effort to simultaneously curtail unions' and workers' political rights.⁵⁵

Outside of the oversight provided by the NLRB, General Motors leaders at Van Nuys continued to look for ways to regulate and influence the political talk of union officials and union members in their plants. In October and November 1964, for instance, the UAW shop committee at GM Van Nuys posted a notice on the union's bulletin board that criticized GM vice president Louis G. Seaton for instituting policies that were an "invasion by the Corporation of the workers' privacy": at Van Nuys, the company insisted upon the right to "engage in surveillance" of workers "during relief and rest periods" and union representatives "in plant meeting rooms" with the aid of various technologies such as "motion picture" cameras and listening devices.⁵⁶ The GM Industrial Relations department director, CE Pigg, Jr.,

⁵⁵ General Motors Corporation and Paul Joseph Goldener, p. 1727.

⁵⁶ Fisher Body Unit Information Bulletin, 5 October 1964, in Box 116, Folder 28, UAW-GM Department Collection (UAWGM hereafter), WPRL.

demanded in a short letter to the UAW shop committee that the notice must come down, as the document was “controversial in nature and detrimental to the Labor-Management relationship.”⁵⁷ He did not deny the accusations that appeared in the content of the bulletin board notice. Not only did General Motors leaders at Van Nuys intend to more closely surveil working men and women with the aid of audio and video technology, but they also tried to police the conversation about the topic among workers and union officials by pressing the UAW to remove notices from the union’s bulletin board.

The union bulletin boards at GM Van Nuys were covered in glass and under lock and key, and the union found that they had to battle with the company over the number of keys they would be allowed to circulate among the officials of the union. In the summer of 1965, for example, the union had to file a grievance, and an appeal, in order to be issued a third key that was to be used by a committeeman on the second shift. (The other two keys were in the possession of committeemen who worked on the first shift.) Initially, GM managers refused to issue an extra key, claiming that 2 were plenty. Undeterred, the union continued to insist theirs was a “reasonable request.” Finally, in September 1965, the union learned they would be given the extra key. Why management resisted the issuing of a key befuddled the shop committee at Van Nuys, but company officials probably wanted to better regulate the union’s ability to communicate with their members in the factory. The shop committee noted that the additional key would help “facilitate our efforts in communicating with our membership.”⁵⁸

The National Labor Relations Board uncovered numerous instances of bulletin board policies that were intended to quiet the political voices of workers and unions in the 1960s as well as the 1970s. GM managers would continue to reserve the right to punish workers and union officials who added or removed bulletin board content without authorization. At the General Motors Tech Center in suburban Warren, Michigan, Phillip R. Jackson filed a complaint against the company’s and the union’s 1970-1973 contract, a document that stipulated punishments for anyone who tampered with union bulletin board

⁵⁷ CE Pigg, Jr. to Henry G. Fowzer, 27 November 1964, in Box 116, Folder 28, UAWGM-WPRL.

⁵⁸ Henry G. Fowzer to Frank James, 7 September 1965, in Box 116, Folder 28, UAWGM-WPRL; Henry G. Fowzer to Frank James, 22 July 1965, in Box 116, Folder 28, UAWGM-WPRL; “Topic 9,” n.d., Box 116, Folder 28, UAWGM-WPRL.

space. The Board needed only 4 short pages to repudiate the policy. These rules, which called for “disciplinary action ranging from reprimand to immediate discharge,” were “presumptively invalid.” According to the NLRB, company rules such as these interdicted workers’ right to political discourse in non-working times, as they “constitute prohibitions against solicitation and distribution.”⁵⁹

General Motors not only looked for ways to circumscribe the activities of the UAW on its shop floors, but also the activities of other union organizations inside their plants such as the United Electrical Workers union (UE) of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. In 1974 and again in 1979, several members of the United Electrical Workers at General Motors-owned and operated factories in Ohio, New York, and New Jersey (including Frigidaire in Dayton, Ohio), filed complaints against the company’s efforts to prevent the distribution of political literature by dissident unionists. As they had done in the past, the Board sided with dissident workers in their efforts to level criticisms on those incumbent unions who represented them before company managers. Much like the Van Nuys cases of the 1960s, the Board concluded that GM’s rules were too sweeping, as they forbade any posting or “distribution of literature by employees” in any location at any time.⁶⁰

While the members of the Board focused in these cases on the rights of insurgent unionists among organized rank-and-file workers, they nonetheless included coverage of union-management rules on the topic of union bulletin boards in the GM shops. The rules were rather telling. General Motors intended for shop rules to interdict and constrain, to the greatest extent possible, the political dimensions of organized labor in the factory. The postings of incumbent unions, such as the UAW and the UE, would be narrowly permitted to cover only procedural business or economic matters – not political challenges to any prevailing company institutions or policies. Insurgent unionists who dissented, according to GM’s rules, found themselves prevented from posting or distributing pamphlets, statements, platforms, etc. In

⁵⁹ General Motors Corporation (Chevrolet Engineering Center) and Phillip R. Jackson and International Union, United Automobile Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW), NLRB Decision and Order, 212 NLRB No. 45, 28 June 1974, p. 133-134, pdf available at www.nlrb.gov/search/cases, accessed 2 February 2015.

⁶⁰ General Motors Corporation, Frigidaire Division and Seth B. Goldberg and International Union of Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers and Its Local No. 801, NLRB Decision and Order, 240 NLRB No. 20, 24 January 1979, p. 168-171, pdf available at www.nlrb.gov/search/cases, accessed 2 February 2015.

fact, the 1974 complaint against General Motors by UE members alleged that the company unfairly prohibited the efforts of dissident unionists to distribute campaign literature during a union election campaign, while allowing the incumbent factions to do so freely on the company grounds.⁶¹

Beyond the automobile industry, numerous other National Labor Relations Board cases during the 1960s dealt with the politics of bulletin boards inside manufacturing establishments. Industrial employers such as the Duro Fittings Company or the California Girl company (a Los Angeles-based manufacturer of girls' clothing), among many others, wanted to retain control of bulletin board spaces as a way to control in-plant conversations about union-management negotiations, shop floor rules, and unionization. At California Girl, for example, company officials illegally refused to grant space or resources that would allow the members of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) union to put up a bulletin board for communicating union business. Over the course of lengthy negotiations with the company, the firm's chief negotiator Mrs. Edwin Selvin, who worked for a California business that specialized in antiunion consulting activities, insisted that the ILGWU did not need any bulletin board space in order to conduct union affairs:

Union: How about a bulletin board on which we could post notices of union meetings?

Selvin: No sir.

Union: Union business.

Selvin: No.... We don't have a bulletin board up in that department and I'm sure we don't—

Union: We'll pay for the bulletin board.

Selvin: Well we don't . . . you have contact with your people without a bulletin board, you have adequate means to reach people without that. We don't feel that it will be helpful to have a union bulletin board.

The subsequent 1960 National Labor Relations Board decision ultimately forced the company to allow space in the workplace for a union bulletin board.⁶² At nearby Duro Fittings in 1961, an electrical equipment company that was also located in Los Angeles, the company wrongly refused to allocate

⁶¹ General Motors Corporation and Donald E. Coatney and International Union of Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers, AFL-CIO-CLC, and Its Locals 801, 755, 717, 509, and 416, NLRB Decision and Order, 211 NLRB No. 123, 25 June 1974, p. 967, pdf available at www.nlr.gov/search/cases, accessed 2 February 2015.

⁶² California Girl, Inc. and Local 84, International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, NLRB Decision and Order, 129 NLRB No. 21, 3 October 1960, p. 209-221, pdf available at www.nlr.gov/search/cases, accessed 2 February 2015.

bulletin board space to the United Automobile Workers union because, as the company put it, “it was not Respondent’s business to do communications work for the Union.”⁶³ The Board overturned the company’s policy.

By the 1970s, antiunion measures at General Motors frequently stemmed from company opposition to the activities of dissident unionists within the rank-and-file memberships of the UAW and the United Electrical Workers of the CIO. At Fisher Body in Detroit, where auto workers manufactured Cadillac components, managers used physical and legal intimidation to suppress workers’ efforts to recall an unpopular UAW Local 15 committeeman in the winter of 1976. On two occasions inside the plant, foremen Dave West, Claude E. Caffee, and Albert Walko tried to confiscate (they “snatched” and “grabbed”) dissident unionists’ petitions and pamphlets in non-working areas. Supervisors even threatened one worker with discharge if he continued to advise workers of their “rights to file grievances against the Respondent” [GM]. Queried later by the National Labor Relations Board, one supervisor remarked, “I don’t like instigators.”⁶⁴

Though few in number, apparent incidents of managers’ anti-unionist sentiment at GM reappeared on the dockets of the National Labor Relations Board throughout the years that followed the 1960s and early-to-mid 1970s. In January 1979, at GM’s Pontiac plant once again, UAW committeeman Jerry G. Allen filed an NLRB complaint that supervisors denied him union representation when he had been accused of time theft by the company. As GM security personnel investigated reports of workers stealing tools and selling them illegally at a local bowling alley (“Orchard Lanes”), they happened upon Allen and other UAW committeemen. While not connected with the illegal activity, management questioned why Allen had left the factory without officially punching out. Allen explained that he was attending to “union business” at the bowling alley, as he was talking to other union officials there. But company officials

⁶³ Duro Fittings Company and International Union, Automobile, Aircraft and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, UAW-AFL-CIO, NLRB Decision and Order, 130 NLRB No. 71, 23 February 1961, p. 653-663, pdf available at www.nlrb.gov/search/cases, accessed 2 February 2015.

⁶⁴ General Motors Corporation and Martin Andrews and David Sole, NLRB Decision and Order, no case number given, 20 October 1978, esp. p. 35-36, pdf available at www.nlrb.gov/search/cases, accessed 3 April 2015.

continued to hound him about the supposed “fraudulent act.” Allen became progressively more frustrated with each confrontation over the matter (“Give me a damn lawyer,” he told them during one meeting.), and his repeated request for union representation in this worsening dispute was denied. On January 17, General Motors summarily fired Jerry G. Allen for his “act of fraud.” Allen, however, later won his reinstatement when the NLRB ruled in his favor.⁶⁵

Labor and working-class historians have unintentionally minimized the significance of GM’s war on the Wagner Act in the postwar years. While they have acknowledged the company’s “southern strategy” of the 1960s-1970s (whereby GM tried to relocate some industrial operations to historically anti-union southern US states) and the company’s relocation of various operations overseas as evidence of antiunion prejudices and practices within General Motors in the postwar years, they have not probed further in order to uncover the unionized shop floor itself as a significant site where management practiced antiunion politics. While sociologist Ruth Milkman wrote about supervision and union conflicts at GM’s Linden New Jersey plant as evidence of chronic “adversarialism,” I would suggest this term does not go far enough to explain the politics of managers in the post-sit down years.⁶⁶ General Motors was actively engaged in a long-term process that would put various forms of pressure on union officials and nullify the Wagner Act in its factories to the fullest extent possible. The evidence presented here suggests that General Motors never accepted the United Automobile Workers as a permanent resident adversary: Wallace R. O’Neil, Jerry G. Allen, the Fisher Body dissidents, and union bulletin boards were all casualties of this prolonged fight in the post-World War II years.

While the contractual problems over political speech and bulletin boards suggested the ways in which antiunion measures could be implemented in a systematic or standardized manner, the Wallace R. O’Neil case in particular highlighted the seemingly arbitrary and personal ways that antiunion culture

⁶⁵ General Motors Corporation and Jerry G. Allen, NLRB Decision and Order, 251 NLRB No. 121, 27 August 1980, p. 852, 850, pdf available at www.nlrb.gov/search/cases, accessed 2 February 2015. See also the reports on the case that are found in Box 85, Folder 20, UAW Region 1B Collection, WPRL.

⁶⁶ Milkman, *Farewell to the Factory*, esp. 51-92. On the Wagner Act and its legacies, see Joseph A. McCartin, “‘As Long As There Survives’: Contemplating the Wagner Act After Eighty Years,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* 14:2 (2017): 21-42.

could be made visible and tangible in postwar auto plants. Though not explained in the NLRB write-up of its decision and order, it would appear that managers had a particular distrust and disdain for O'Neil as an official of the United Automobile Workers. His own punishments, after all, were significantly harsher and longer than any of the repairmen who actually walked off the job at Pontiac. Were the managers at General Motors in Pontiac becoming increasingly unwilling to work with a union that was unable to completely control its members? Was O'Neil someone who managers regarded as an especially troublesome figure in the factory? Obviously, managers wanted to get rid of him in a very conspicuous way, perhaps to put the union at Pontiac on notice.

Also, the politics of bulletin boards in post-World War II automobile factories highlights the extent to which managers hoped to minimize and constrain the presence and the voice of the labor movement. By trying to force the union to allow only "bona fide" issues such as notices for elections and meetings to appear on its bulletin boards, managers at General Motors actively tried to take the politics out of the labor movement in the unionized auto industry.

The conversation among labor and working-class historians about antiunion culture and practices neglects the events and periods of time that follow unionization and/or the failure of organizing drives among unorganized workers. Just as labor historians' analyses of antiunion politics in the contexts of government and the media suggest, antiunion measures are truly ongoing – even in the context of workplaces that are quietly dismissed by labor historians as already organized with secure unions. Here, too, antiunion politics and culture should be pursued beyond climactic benchmarks such as the victories over anti-labor terror in Flint, Detroit, or Dearborn during the late 1930s and early 1940s. At General Motors, unionization did not end the history of union-management conflict; in fact, antiunion politics assumed new day-to-day forms. GM would still be engaged in shop floor struggles against the UAW in the decades that followed the sit-down era.

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