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Automobile Workers Strikes

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Automobile Workers Strikes

Abstract

Automobile workers' strikes occurred in essentially four eras: the lost strikes by the industry's craft unions in the early twentieth century, the dramatic sit-down victories of the 1930s, the mixture of wildcat and authorized strikes during the postwar economic boom from the 1940s through the 1970s, and the decline of strikes that accompanied the policy of "jointness" between company and union after J9S0.

Autoworkers' strike strategies reflected, in part, the particular structure of the industry, which took shape in the 1920s. Auto production is a complex process of interdependent operations to produce parts and assemble vehicles, each containing tens of thousands of parts. These parts are either produced or bought by the original equipment manufacturers (OEMs), who assemble and market vehicles. Due to the diversity of the operations and materials required to create a car, no single company carries out the whole process in one single location. The result is a networked production organization, with parts flowing through an interdependent chain of operations. Stoppages in one part of the chain within an OEM or at a supplier can result in disruptions to the overall flow of production and financial pain for the company, with implications for the national economy as a whole.

Keywords

labor movement, United States, automobile workers, labor strikes

Disciplines

Collective Bargaining | Labor History | Unions | United States History

Comments

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AUTOMOBILE WORKERS' STRIKES

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Automobile workers' strikes occurred in essentially four eras: the lost strikes by the industry's craft unions in the early twentieth century, the dramatic sit-down victories of the 1930s, the mixture of wildcat and authorized strikes during the postwar economic boom from the 1940s through the 1970s, and the decline of strikes that accompanied the policy of "jointness" between company and union after 1950.

Autoworkers' strike strategies reflected, in part, the particular structure of the industry, which took shape in the 1920s. Auto production is a complex process of interdependent operations to produce parts and assemble vehicles, each containing tens of thousands of parts. These parts are either produced or bought by the original equipment manufacturers (OEMs), who assemble and market vehicles. Due to the diversity of the operations and materials required to create a car, no single company carries out the whole process in one single location. The result is a networked production organization, with parts flowing through an interdependent chain of operations. Stoppages in one part of the chain within an OEM or at a supplier can result in disruptions to the overall flow of production and financial pain for the company, with implications for the national economy as a whole.

The industry in the United States has been highly concentrated, with three companies dominating production before the 1970s. General Motors was and still is the largest; at one point in the 1970s it was the nation's largest employer. Ford was the second-largest seller of cars, followed by Chrysler; which was until recently a distant third. Together, these automakers are known as the Big Three, and their blue-collar workforce is almost entirely unionized. Since the 1970s, however; a handful of foreign OEMs have made major inroads, first through sales of imported cars and then, since the 1980s, through domestic auto production. In order of 2005 sales in the United States, these foreign competitors include Toyota, Honda, Nissan, BMW, Mitsubishi, Isuzu, and Subaru. Toyota surpassed Chrysler to take over the number three spot in 2006 and may soon pass Ford. Excluding their joint ventures with the Big Three (such as the NUMMI Jointventure between General Motors and Toyota in Fremont, California), foreign-owned assembly plants are completely nonunion. The growth of imports and the rise of nonunion transplants have put pressure on the unionized Big Three to cut costs and improve quality. This change has corresponded with the rise of labor-management partnership and the decline of strikes.

Despite the growth of employment in the Southeast, around 70 percent of auto employment is still located in the Midwest, mainly in Michigan. The Midwest still benefits from its first-mover advantage of the early twentieth century, when local companies developed internal combustion engines (while other regions were still working with steam power) and then perfected mass production processes. Since the 1970s, companies have been closing plants in California and the eastern seaboard and opening new plants in the Southeast first with the "southern strategy" of General Motors and then with the foreign transplants of the 1990s. This movement is partly due to right-to-work laws, anti-union attitudes, and

subsidies from southern state and local governments, and partly due to the expansion of the demand for vehicles in the region. Nevertheless, much of the industry retains its Midwestern identity—the Big Three as well as a wide range of supplier firms are based in the Detroit area and carry out the bulk of their production in the Great Lakes states.

The most important union in the industry was and is the United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America International Union (UAW). Founded in 1935, the UAW grew to a peak of 1.5 million members in 1979, immediately before the domestic industry began its long decline. Though founded as an affiliate of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to represent workers in heavy industry, the membership of the UAW has become quite diverse. The UAW has organized workers in the public sector, health care, universities, and a wide range of other sectors in order to make up for some of the jobs lost in the automotive industry. The union has repeatedly attempted and failed to organize workers at nonunion transplants. Between 1983 and 2005, union density in the motor vehicle manufacturing sector declined from above 58 percent to below 30 percent. Other important unions in the industry, particularly at independent supplier plants, include the International Union of Electrical Workers (part of the Communications Workers of America), UNITE HERE, and the United Steel Workers,

The Defeat of Craft Strikes

The automobile industry was born around 1900, at first heavily dependent on the skills of nativeborn craftsmen recruited from horse-and-buggy and bicycle manufacture. Labor productivity was about 1.6 cars per year per worker. Work methods were experimental, firms small, and production manual. Craft unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), such as the International Association of Machinists, organized the workforce.

The situation began to change as firms discovered the mass production methods first associated with Henry Ford. Ford divided the process into dozens of components using new machines that were highly productive, and he reduced the company's reliance on craftsmen and worker knowledge. He introduced the assembly line and created a much more vertically integrated process by purchasing a wide range of supplier businesses. The Rouge Plant, for example, not only assembled vehicles but also produced a wide range of parts and even contained a steel mill.

Unions of skilled crafts resisted the changes to the work process, which allowed the companies to hire migrant and unskilled workers at lower wages. In 1907, nearly all of Detroit's organized crafts—the boilermakers, machinists, molders, patternmakers, metal polishers, painters, and upholsterers—went on strike to protect their organizations. This strike movement was a bitter defeat for organized labor and revealed splits built into the occupational structure of unionism at the time. A boilermakers' strike, for example, degenerated into fighting between native-born unionists and Italian strikebreakers; the metal polishers were broken in an eight-week strike and replaced by Hungarian workers. To break the unions, employers used injunctions, police patrolling, and a city wide "Labor Bureau" with files detailing the union activities of 40,000 workers—nearly half of the city's workforce.

Until the 1930s, unionism and striking were rare in the auto industry, although a few attempts were made. In the 1920s a British immigrant organized the United Automobile Aircraft and Vehicle Workers of America, which, after collapsing, was reorganized as the Auto Workers Union (AWU). These organizations were modeled on the British shop-

steward system and led department-level strikes, mainly at auto body plants. Although these unions at first had difficulties uniting skilled and unskilled workers, they managed in 1933 to organize a successful strike of nearly 1,500 workers against a pay cut at the Motor Products firm. This inspired a series of strikes, not all successful, accounting for 15,000 workers in Detroit, mainly led by skilled-trades workers at body plants. The largest of these strikes, a strike of 10,000 workers at Briggs, failed due to the tactical mistakes of the Communist strike leadership, and led to the collapse of the AWU a few months into the strike wave.

Sit-Down Strikes, Skilled Trades, and the Rise of the UAW

During the 1930s, autoworkers fought pitched battles with companies and public authorities in their efforts to establish collective bargaining. The most famous of these efforts were the sit-down strikes of 1936-38, which coincided with the organization of the UAW at General Motors. Along with subsequent strikes and the union's cooperation with the government in World War II, these strikes led to industry-wide coordinated bargaining with the UAW.

In the early 1930s, the Mechanics Educational Society (MESA), with organizers in Detroit, Pontiac, and Flint, emerged to organize skilled tool and die workers in the auto industry. In the fall of 1933, MESA led a six-week strike that spread throughout these cities and closed more than 100 shops and included 14,000 participants. Although the strike failed to impose sectoral bargaining, it did bring plant-level agreements to fifty-one plants, including a few large "captive shops" like Fisher Body. These agreements included union recognition, an end to precarious contract work, and some wage increases. By early 1934, MESA claimed 21,000 members in Detroit. Eventually, the organization split over the issue of whether to amalgamate with the UAW, and several key local organizations became militant, democratic UAW locals.

The Auto-Lite strike of April and May 1934 was another important event, involving not only workers but also the unemployed. An AFL local organized the strike, but only 50 percent of the workforce joined the walkout. The company kept the plant running with strikebreakers. A local organization of unemployed people, affiliated with the American Workers Party led by A.J. Muste, supported the strike and mobilized pickets. In defiance of a court injunction won by the company, unemployed workers continued to block the plant's gates. When leaders were arrested for contempt of court, thousands more citizens gathered to disrupt the proceedings; rallies escalated and included up to 10,000 workers at the plant. After the sheriff began arresting demonstrators, a battle broke out between law enforcement authorities (including "special deputies" paid by the company) and demonstrators. Deputies attacked protesters with fire hoses, guns, and tear gas, while demonstrators used stones to smash factory windows. On the second day of unrest, 900 National Guard troops arrived with bayonets and machine guns. The troops fired on protesters, killing two, but were still unsuccessful in quelling the protest. Eventually,



Although Governor Frank Murphy authorized the mobilization of the National Guard during the 1936-37 General Motors sit-down strikes in Flint, Michigan, he refused to allow the Guard to use force to remove the strikers from the plants. His decision—a rare one in American labor history—essentially allowed the workers to stay in the plants and gave them tremendous leverage in negotiations with the company. (Courtesy: Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.)

management agreed to close the plant, allowing protest to die down, and with a threatened general strike involving eighty-five additional local unions, management finally recognized the union, rehired strikers, and granted a wage increase.

The most important episode of the period came in 1937-38, with the sit-down strikes at General Motors (GM) in Flint. In 1934, the AFL had discredited itself in a failed effort to win concessions from GM. After the union threatened to strike over a wide range of worker grievances, President Roosevelt agreed to arbitrate the matter, prompting the AFL to back down. The president's decision conceded nothing to the workers and the AFL locals collapsed. The following year, the UAW emerged and affiliated with a new breakaway confederation, the CIO. Using the sit-down method developed by rubber workers in Akron, the UAW supported spontaneous in-plant efforts to resist speed ups and pay cuts. In 1936, local UAW affiliates supported sit-downs in Atlanta, South Bend, Detroit, Cleveland, and Kansas City. By the end of the year, strikers had crippled Fisher Body, a crucial plant in Flint. Workers shut down production, took over the plant, and ceased production. The strike spread throughout the GM system, bringing January 1937 production down from 224,000 cars and trucks to 60,000.

The company fought back with an injunction (from a judge who was also a major shareholder in the company) and a community petition, and using the police, the National Guard, and private guards to starve out the strikers. When police attempted to block supporters from bringing supplies to the strikers, workers used fire hoses and threw heavy objects to drive them away. Local leaders spread the strike to another large local GM plant on February 1, prompting a new injunction and an influx of thousands of union supporters into the city. GM management and the governor asked local authorities to demobilize and agreed on February 11 to negotiate with the UAW as the sole representative of workers. During negotiations, local strikes continued without UAW authorization, and sit-downs spread to other companies, especially Chrysler. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that during 1937 nearly 400,000 workers engaged in sit-down strikes lasting a day or longer.

In 1939, the union expanded its victory of 1936-37 through a strike of tool and die workers. The union was still numerically weak in the workforce as a whole. Among GM's 200,000 workers, only 3 percent were in the skilled trades. The tool and die workers, however, represented a UAW stronghold. These workers were mainly foreign-born, from Great Britain or Northern Ireland. As the strike wore on, the company faced the problem of how to introduce its 1940 models, and its attempts to bring dies from outside of Michigan to the Detroit area merely had the effect of spreading the strike. Competitive pressures along with urging from federal and Michigan government officials, including the new National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), forced the company to settle after a month. The agreement foreshadowed several features of auto unionism to come: GM made the UAW the exclusive representative of workers at all plants where it did not face a contending AFL group and accepted coordinated bargaining across all plants; in return, the UAW agreed to oppose strikes of its members outside of established dispute resolution procedures. As Steve Babson chronicles, this strike brought Walter Reuther to prominence, and he continued promoting these policies in the postwar decades as UAW president. This struggle built momentum for NLRB elections in 1940, which solidified the UAW's exclusive right to represent 227,000 workers in 110 plants.

Sit-down strikes gradually went out of favor with union leadership, which over time imposed more and more discipline over the rank and file in its use of strikes. While the UAW won recognition from GM management as the bargaining agent of workers, workers continued to strike over workplace problems, although the union had agreed to end strikes. Top UAW and CIO leaders blamed Communist influence, while ironically the Communist Party also denounced the unruly behavior of strikers. Given the no-strike clauses that spread throughout the workplaces represented by the CIO, unions were poised to take on a new role—not only as worker representatives, but as a moderating force over a strike-prone industrial workforce. The centralization of union power, the ban on sit-downs by the U.S. Supreme Court, and the growing role of government-sponsored dispute-resolution machinery led to a transformation of how strikes in industry would take place.

Wildcat and Sanctioned Strikes

For four decades after the establishment of the UAW in the Big Three, a tension existed between national officials seeking to contain strikes and militant local union stewards pushing for immediate solutions to workplace problems.

During this period, substantial numbers of worker hours were lost to both sanctioned and wildcat strikes, but the cause and outcome of each type of strike could be considerably different.

S a n c t i o n e d S t r i k e s

In the years after World War II, the UAW organized strikes that played an important role in shaping the industry's institutional organization but did not have the profound impact of the earlier sit-down strikes. Perhaps the most important official strike was the 113-day walkout at General Motors in 1945-46. With the no-strike pact in the past, Taft-Hartley still in the future, and a strike wave involving 3 million workers ongoing, it was arguably the all-time high-water mark of the U.S. labor movement. With demands for a 30 percent wage increase, access to corporate financial data, and no increase in the price of cars, the UAW embarked on a strike at GM that was to last from November 1945 to March 1946. Some 320,000 workers walked picket lines.

As Nelson Lichtenstein describes it, the strike was part of a broader CIO strategy, spearheaded by UAW leader Walter Reuther, to compensate for the large increases in the cost of living that took place during the war, which were calculated at between 30 percent and 45 percent. The union demanded access to GM's books, with the goal of forcing the company to prove its claim that it could not afford a large wage increase. The union also insisted that GM hold the price of its cars steady, so consumers would not suffer from the workers' wage gains. These demands gave the strike a broad significance. They demonstrated that the union was fighting beyond its membership, for Americans as consumers as well as workers. The strike's outcome would determine not just workers' wages, but whether or not unions would play a role in corporate decisions usually left exclusively to management, such as the price of a company's products. A victory would transform the relationship between company and union, giving the union heretofore unheard of power.

The strategy was to strike the company while allowing its competitors to continue producing, potentially threatening its market share (at one point, the strike leadership considered a Howling GM parts plants supplying the company's competitors to reopen). While the company put out advertisements in newspapers criticizing the union, it agreed to shut down production, thereby limiting the potential for violent conflict at plant gates between strikers and scabs. The union responded with a steady stream of press releases and public speeches using the language of anti-fascism, Workplace democracy, and "a larger pie" (to divide between worker pay and profits). Reuther created a coalition involving the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Eleanor Roosevelt, and other celebrities to support the strikers and their goals, emphasizing the broad social import of the conflict for postwar American society. Despite the strength of this coalition and the determination of the workers to stay out, under pressure from a presidential fact-finding board, the UAW settled the strike for a raise of just 18¢, or about 15 percent. The union won no access to the company's books and no guarantee that the company would hold car prices steady, for Reuther; the strike was a success, as it consolidated his leadership of the UAW.

Inflation soon wiped out the 1946 wage increase at GM, and the UAW determined to eliminate the impact of inflation in the 1950 bargaining round. It negotiated the so-called 1950 Treaty of Detroit without a strike, taking advantage of the company's desire for labor peace and wage stabilization in a period of prosperity. The agreement set wage increases

to match the cost of living plus an "annual improvement factor" of 2 percent that would distribute part of GM's productivity increase to the workforce.

From then on, sanctioned autoworker strikes were mostly staid affairs. A 104-day Chrysler strike in 1950 revolved around the union's demand for stringent actuarial standards for the firms' pension plan, but ended merely in the company following the industry-wide pattern. The GM strike of 1964 did not include all plants; under pressure from Democratic allies in the White House, Reuther agreed to keep the parts plants open and prodded militant locals into settling plant-level contracts before the presidential election. Neither the company nor the UAW declared victory. The forty-seven-day Ford strike of 1968 further ratcheted up wages and payments to laid-off workers in the context of Vietnam-era inflation, but once again was a far cry from the militant energy of the 1930s.

A more frequent but smaller kind of sanctioned strike occurred at the plant level. James Zetka calls these "bureaucratic strikes" for their highly regulated character. These strikes were especially frequent from the mid-1950s through the early 1970s. Under the terms of collective bargaining, local unions were allowed to go on strike over a wide range of issues not covered by the master contract, but, in practice, most of the strikes were over job control issues. These strikes, however; happened in such a predictable form that management had the ability to control their timing and outcomes to avoid strikes that would harm the company's bottom line.

Wildcat Strikes

During World War II, the national UAW signed the same no-strike pledge as several other national unions. In a special convention, the union passed a resolution not only banning strikes during wartime but also eliminating special payments for Saturday, Sunday, and holiday work in order to keep plants running twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week (Auto plants were covered, because they had been largely converted to war production.) Although this limited what workers could demand and how they could win it, tight labor markets, cost-plus government contracting practices, and a focus on quality (as opposed to low cost and high quantity) all served to strengthen workers' bargaining power in the workplace. Despite opposition at high levels within the union, there were numerous walkouts, especially at Chrysler, over management demands for changed work organization and hiring practices. In 1943, a walkout of more than 27,000 workers on the day of a War Labor Board hearing led to a stronger grievance procedure; new work standards in February 1945 led to an eleven-day strike of 19,000 workers, also resulting in a victory for workers. As Steve Jefferys has shown, both of these strikes and the many other wartime Wildcats were important blows to the authority of management and showed how difficult the national union's task of containing conflict was.

In Detroit, the UAW faced an especially volatile racial mix in the plants. The recruitment and promotion of black workers in formerly segregated plants prompted "'hate strikes.'" Not only did white workers walk off the job, but some supervisors and managers used hate strikes as an argument against racial integration in the workplace. At Packard, for example, hundreds of white workers walked off the job when the company promoted three black workers. This strike reflected a company strategy to split the local union. However, it prompted action from the War Labor Board and tire national UAW president R.J. Thomas, which led to the firing of thirty of the strike's ringleaders, according to historians

August Meier and Elliott Rudwick. As racial conflict continued through the postwar decades, the national UAW faced the difficult task of dealing with the racism of its white members.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, as James Zetka shows, unauthorized strikes were more frequent than authorized ones. During the 1930s and 1940s, workers had developed the camaraderie, confidence, and workplace organization with which to take on management. In 1955 there were sixty wildcat strikes reported in the news media; in 1958 there were eighty (in more normal years, the number would be between twenty and thirty). Wildcat strikes, however, declined in frequency during the 1960s and early 1970s, never getting above fifteen per year. Wildcats in this period generally concerned speed ups, unfair treatment by supervisors, health and safety, heat, and other workplace issues.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, wildcat strikes, though infrequent, took on a new meaning. As activist chroniclers Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin have described, they became a way to articulate demands for racial equality and worker control. Marxist parties dispatched activists to Detroit, which seemed to be turning in to the cradle of a second American revolution, and dozens of radical university students went to work in auto plants to organize the workers' uprising. After the urban riots of 1967, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers established organizations—usually small—in several of Detroit's auto plants. These local activists criticized the indifference of local union officialdom to racism and speedup and the bureaucratic conservatism of the UAW. The first walkout, in May 1968, involved 4,000 workers at Dodge Main. It was the first wildcat strike there in fourteen years and was led by a group called the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM). DRUM activists followed this with a walkout three years later, this time including a march to the local union hall and a public hearing of grievances.

An analogous group at Chrysler's Eldon Avenue gear and axle plant staged a brief wildcat strike in 1970 over the company's threat to arbitrarily fire a worker. In the summer of 1973, walkouts idled three of Chrysler's plants. At Chrysler's Jefferson Avenue assembly plant, for example, two workers in their twenties shut down the assembly line by taking over a portion of it and locking themselves in a cage in order to protest the racist behavior of a foreman. After thirteen hours, during which the two men were protected by a large group of supporters, the company agreed to fire the foreman and grant the protesters amnesty. Two other strikes by in-plant revolutionary groups took place to protest severe health and safety problems.

The Lordstown, Ohio, strike of 1972 similarly became a fixture of left-wing discourse, and had very similar causes and goals, although the strikers were predominately white. Rather than becoming linked to urban revolution, Lordstown was associated with a revolt of young workers against the alienation of factory life, according to Stanley Aronowitz. However, a similar strike at Norwood, Ohio, was led by older workers, suggesting that alienation and the effects of speedup were hardly limited to young workers.

1980 and After

The U.S. auto industry faced increasing competition from foreign imports in the 1970s and 1980s. Union leaders responded by offering to work with management at the Big Three U.S. auto companies. The era of cooperation did not

bring the complete disappearance of strikes—a 1998 strike against a GM parts plant in Flint, for example, brought most production to a standstill throughout North America and resulted in billions of lost dollars. Curiously, this strike strengthened the hand of advocates of labor-management partnership in corporate management, who argued that provoking strikes was expensive. For the U&W, this strike was highly exceptional, and the union has shown itself less and less willing to exercise the strike threat out of its interest in retaining jobs and maintaining its influence in company policies. As a result, since the late 1970s, strikes in the U.S. auto industry have become rare.

Chrysler's 1979 bankruptcy sent a signal across American industry that chronic problems with quality and price needed to be solved, and that contentious labor relations were part of the problem. The U.S. Congress passed a special act that year allowing \$1.5 billion in loan guarantees in exchange for concessions from the UAW, suppliers, and lenders. With 40,000 out of 64,000 workers on layoff, workers—including the UAW, other unions, and nonunion workers—took pay concessions of \$627 million, suppliers froze prices, lenders forgave debts, and state governments extended loans. Top UAW leaders argued that these concessions were preferable to the alternative—a complete collapse of the industry. Similar concessionary pacts were reached at GM and Ford, and labor-management partnership efforts began to develop at all three companies. At first, "jointness" was carried out primarily on an experimental level. By the mid-1980s, however, bureaucracies had developed, with in-plant appointed officials and separate office buildings in Detroit, to spread the message of constructive labor relations. Meanwhile, with political support from the union hierarchy and technical support from the joint training infrastructures, the companies implemented lean production techniques to ratchet up pressure on employees to work more efficiently, as Mike Parker and Jane Slaughter have shown.

The most important strike of this period came in 1998. It began in Flint at a GM stamping plant employing 3,400 UAW members and a Delphi components plant making sparkplugs, fuel filters, and speedometers. The former was a key supplier for the new generation of pickup trucks and SUVs, on strike over management demands to reduce job classifications, while the latter, the only plant making a number of key components, was locked in a dispute over outsourcing. Because of GM's 'lean' production system, dependent on quick deliveries and made vulnerable by low inventories, the effects of the strike quickly spread. The strike began on June 8, and by July 23, 193,517 workers at GM assembly plants and suppliers throughout North America were idled. This dispute did not lead to an upsurge in militancy; in fact, it was the end of a long string of local strikes at GM over in-plant issues. After this strike, there were very few strikes at GM, as managers struggled to compensate for billions of dollars of lost revenues and top UAW officials scrambled to avoid any implication that a seemingly "local" strike might really be a midcontract "national" strike, banned by the national collective bargaining agreement.

Other strikes at suppliers involved the Big Three in various ways. During a 1997 recognition strike at Johnson Controls in Oberlin, Ohio, and Plymouth, Michigan, for example, Ford refused to accept parts from the struck companies. This led to the first major victories in the UAW's attempt to force parts makers—mainly just-in-time suppliers carrying out work outsourced from the Big Three—to renounce union-busting through card-check neutrality agreements.

In another case, management at American Axle, a firm controlling five former GM axle plants, used a strike to

strengthen its bargaining position with its former corporate parent. In 2003, American Axle was the last spun-off supplier to negotiate two-tier wages. It was well known to union officials that the supplier was negotiating simultaneously with GM's purchasing agents and the union. A show of resolve by the UAW demonstrated that squeezing prices might result in late deliveries to GM, which remained heavily reliant on the company for axles. In a system of just-in-time inventory, an extended strike would have been as damaging as the Flint strike of 1998. Unlike the Flint strike, however, the strike was ended after a day, with the acceptance in principle of the same two-tier wage structure agreed at other former Big Three suppliers. The outcome and process of striking at this independent company was, in fact, bound with a pattern of concessions and the employer's relationship with the assembly company.

In a third case, Visteon, a firm consisting of Ford's spun-off parts plants, forced non-UAW members on strike over deep pay cuts. At the Bedford, Indiana, plant, workers were represented by the manufacturing arm of the Communication Workers of America. Managers threatened to shift half of the plant's 1,100 jobs to Mexico and proposed a pay cut from \$16.00 an hour to \$10.00 an hour. When the company began removing equipment from the plant, workers went on strike. Tire strike had all the markings of American class struggle: bussed-in African-American strikebreakers to spark racist reactions among the mostly white workforce, private security guards assaulting pickets, and a pair of overturned burning cars in front of the plant gate. When workers discovered through an internal Web site that the machines were being moved not to Mexico but to a UAW-represented plant in Michigan, UAW local leadership announced that it would not accept the work. Despite this show of solidarity, the local union in Bedford agreed to management's demands, according to *Labor Notes*.

C o n c l u s i o n

The UAW rose and fell with its ability and willingness to strike. The sit-down and skilled trades' strikes in the 1930s midwifed the union's birth. From the beginning of World War II until the Chrysler bankruptcy, the national union leadership took increasing responsibility for controlling autoworkers' strike weapon. Strikes became increasingly rule based, governed not only by labor law but also at the local level by master agreements. Wildcat strikes became important, especially because they sought to solve local workplace issues that union officials often ignored, including in-plant race relations and worker alienation.

After 1980, the environment for autoworkers' strikes changed radically. Economic competition and poor management brought a crisis to the Big Three automakers. Labor-management partnership became the union's primary response, and the emergence of a 'jointness' infrastructure created large numbers of union positions to work full-time in cooperation with management. The UAW failed to organize the Big Three's competition or win a reform of pensions and health care that would have shifted the costs of the in-firm retirement system more broadly across society or industry. Strikes became shorter and localized, and the intensifying relations of interdependence, information exchange, and cooperation made the whole issue of striking an uncomfortable one for the union. Meanwhile, an immense nonunion sector grew, not only in the Southeast but also in union strongholds like Ohio and Indiana, where striking was completely absent. As the union lost its will or ability to strike, union density declined and unionized employers became increasingly

vulnerable to nonunion competition. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the UAW faces a crisis threatening its very existence in the auto industry.

See also: The Decline of Strikes, 72; World War II Hate Strikes, 126; The Rise and Fall of the Sit-Down Strike, 204; Strikes in the United States Since World War II, 226; Rubber Workers' Strikes, 398.

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