Conflict, Cooperation, and the Global Auto Factory

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I. INTRODUCTION

Since 1973, the American automobile industry has experienced a shift toward more cooperative labor relations. Many observers saw the 1984 contract between General Motors (GM) and the United Auto Workers as a pathbreaking agreement marking the beginning of a new era of cooperation. Historically, the legacy of labor relations in the auto industry has been one of conflict, from the time of bloody violence over the right to unionize in the late 1930s to the protracted standoff between workers and management over issues of workplace control at Lordstown in 1972. In contrast, since the initiation of a Quality of Worklife program at GM in 1973, there have been an increasing number of cooperative arrangements to address both new issues and reemerging issues. The central provision of the 1984 GM-UAW pact—a "job bank" providing for placement of workers displaced by new technology and other causes—is one of the most noteworthy examples. However, labor relations in the auto industry are still characterized by considerable conflict, as the 1984 pact was reached only after corporate threats and a strike by the UAW. The goal of this essay is to explain the shift toward more cooperative labor relations in the auto industry, with a special focus on the role of conflict itself. The

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nature of this cooperation will also be examined in terms of the relative power of labor and management to pursue contradictory interests.

The coexistence of conflict and cooperation is a well established theme in social theory. Especially relevant is Simmel's observation that even the most conflict-filled relationships necessarily attain a certain amount of cooperation if only in order that the relationship may continue to exist.\(^2\) To characterize changes in labor relations we will utilize a typology of conflict and cooperation in labor relations.\(^3\) "Conflict" and "cooperation" can be seen as polar opposite ideal types that reflect substantively different patterns of labor relations. Under conflict relations, labor and management focus their energies on weakening each other in their struggle over control of the workplace and for a share of the wealth. Conflict fundamentally involves all-out resistance by management to the collective organization of workers, and the aggressive challenge by the workers and their organization to management's prerogatives of control. On the other end of the spectrum is cooperation, characterized by management's full acceptance of the union as an active partner in a formal plan, joint handling of both personnel and production problems, willingness to address each other's concerns, and equitable sharing of the wealth gained from cooperative efforts. The middle ground between conflict and cooperation—"adversarial relations"—involves significant quantities of each. It may range from observing legalistic minimums of cooperation while engaging in considerable conflict, to formal legalism tempered by tolerance and cooperation in practice, so as to reduce conflict.

Labor conflict is a key dynamic in changing patterns of labor relations, as union and management pursue contradictory interests. Giddens notes that one of the primary goals of workers in unionizing has been the "modification of market capacity to secure scarce economic rewards."\(^4\) This is a strategy of "aggressive economism" in which unions stress heightened market capacity over all other concerns. A second major issue for unions has been that of control over the work process. Rather than seriously challenging the hierarchy of authority in the firm, unions have typically followed a strategy of "defensive control" whereby an effort is made by the union to make more formal the control already possessed by workers. Giddens notes that a union strategy of aggressive economism, in combination with a defensive approach to control, facilitates the institutionalization of industrial conflict. The pursuit of aggressive economism by the UAW during most of the post-war period can be seen as a factor in the auto industry's tendency during this period to stay within the bounds of adversarial labor relations.

Braverman's study of the detailed division of labor and the introduction of mechanization offers important insights into management strategies.

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