

**The Little Car that Did Nothing Right: the 1972 Lordstown Assembly Strike, the
Chevrolet Vega, and the Unraveling of Growth Economics**

Thesis

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By

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Abstract

In March 1972, the United Automobile Workers (UAW) struck for eighteen days at the General Motors (GM) assembly complex in Lordstown, Ohio. Previous historical studies have focused on the origins of labor-management conflict at the factory. Drawing upon documents from the UAW's archives, the business press, and automotive industry trade publications, this thesis contextualizes the strike by linking shop floor conditions with GM's business strategy, the Nixon administration's economic policy, and working class life in the Mahoning Valley. The UAW and GM saw the Chevrolet Vega, manufactured at Lordstown, as the domestic industry's best response to import competition. But bureaucratic imperatives, especially within GM's management structure, encouraged a series of confrontations between the company and union that culminated in the strike and undermined the Vega's viability. The thesis expands our understanding of an iconic moment in American labor history and illuminates the ongoing problems confronting the U.S. automobile industry.

Dedicated to My Mother and Father

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Field of Study

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Introduction: Narratives of Conflict

At 1 A.M. on Saturday, March 4, 1972, members of the United Automobile Workers (UAW) Local 1112 walked out of the General Motors Assembly Division (GMAD) complex in Lordstown, Ohio.¹ Beneath the banners inscribed with company slogans-- "Product Excellence Makes Our Jobs More Secure" and "Quality Keeps Everybody Happy" -- the world's fastest assembly line fell silent. In total, 7500 workers were now on strike.² At each of the four entrances, clusters of workers lit bonfires against the evening cold. Workers blocked the cars of foremen who tried to exit the sprawl of parking lots and service roads that girdled the factory. Sheriff's deputies arrived at the scene, the workers pulled back, and management made its way home.³ The strike's contractual basis lay in over 1000 unresolved grievances under Paragraph 78 of the national contract, the clause regulating the workload of assembly line workers.⁴ The grievances had accumulated during a four-month "work to rule" campaign initiated by the local after October 1, 1971, when GMAD took over the plant's management. The new management consolidated the administratively separate Chevrolet assembly

¹ "Strike Shuts Down Chevy Vega Plant," *The Washington Post*, March 5, 1972.

² Richard G Ellers, "GM Expects Short Strike at Lordstown," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Saturday March 4, 1972.

³ "7,700 Strike at Lordstown; GM Hopeful of a Settlement," *Youngstown Vindicator*, March 4, 1972.

⁴ The exact language of paragraph 78 read "Production standards shall be established on the basis of fairness and equity consistent with the quality of workmanship, efficiency of operations, and the reasonable working capabilities of normal operators. The Local Management of each plant has full authority for settling such matters." Quoted in David Moberg, "Rattling the Golden Chains: Conflict and Consciousness of Auto Workers" (PhD diss, The University of Chicago, 1978), 111.

operation with GM's Fisher Body division, laid-off "surplus" workers, and cracked down on informally tolerated practices, such as workers rotating their jobs ("doubling up").⁵ The tenuous labor peace that had evolved on the shop floor since the plant's opening in 1966 dissolved amidst a flurry of disciplinary lay-offs (DLOs) by managers, and worker-filed grievances. GM charged that workers were deliberately sabotaging production. The UAW countercharged that the company was selling defective cars. The complaints made by workers included excessive production speed, an inadequate number of workers, arbitrary discipline by foremen, and unsafe working conditions. Most of the strike's issues were mainstay grievances in the relationship between the UAW and General Motors.⁶ By March 18, the strike had triggered shut-downs across GM plants in the Midwest and Northeast: 150 workers at a trim plant in Grand Rapids, 400 at hardware plants in Columbus, Detroit, Syracuse, and Trenton, and 900 workers producing engines in Tonawanda, New York, all laid-off.⁷ With an inconclusive settlement, the strike ended on March 22. By this time, what *Business Week* termed the "Lordstown Syndrome," was a media by-word for industrial discontent.⁸

My thesis argues that the implications of the conflict at Lordstown went far beyond a short strike at one factory in the Midwest. At one level of analysis, the elements of the conflict - - "place, space, pace, and power" - - had shaped automobile

⁵For a discussion of grievances at Lordstown see Heather Ann Thompson, "Auto Workers, Dissent, and the UAW: Detroit and Lordstown," in *Autowork*, ed. Robert Asher and Ronald Edsforth (Albany: State University of New York Press: 1995), 200-202.

⁶ For a discussion of the historic nature of grievances against line speed in automotive assembly see Ronald Edsforth and Robert Asher "The Speedup: The Focal Point of Workers' Grievances 1919 -1941" in *Autowork*, ed. Robert Asher and Ronald Edsforth (Albany: State University of New York Press: 1995), 70-73.

⁷ Richard Ellers, "Lordstown GM Strike Spurs New Layoffs: 11,000 Now Idled" *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 18, 1972.

⁸ "The Spreading Lordstown Syndrome," *Business Week*, March 4 1972, 69-70.

assembly lines since the industry's beginning.⁹ Placing the confrontation in a larger context, this thesis is about the transformation of American political-economic life that began in the late 1960s. The failure in the marketplace of the Chevrolet Vega, built at Lordstown, and the subsequent travails of the UAW and GM, gives the struggle additional significance and poignancy. The strike highlights the failure by GM and the UAW, at Lordstown and elsewhere, to find an acceptable *cooperative* arrangement that could accommodate late capitalism's challenges. Further, the conflict demonstrated the inadequacy of the company and the union's existing bargaining relationship.

In a decade, the 1970s, dominated by narratives of rebellious youth, it is not surprising that commentators compared dissident workers to soldiers waging "search and evade" missions in Vietnam and students occupying college offices. The *New York Times* said that "Lordstown workers, with an average age under 25, make no secret of their distaste for the empty, repetitive nature of their duties as nursemaids to a line on which a car goes by every 3 seconds and all the skilled operations are done by sophisticated machines."¹⁰ Youthful dissatisfaction with the *status quo* had arrived on the factory floor, like everywhere else, despite "the supposed insulation" from labor discontent provided by "good wages, high general unemployment, and a location in the conservative heartland of Middle America."¹¹ Even UAW Vice-President Ken Bannon remarked, "New and younger workers will be less attracted to repetitious and uninteresting or physically arduous tasks. The traditional concept that hard work is a virtue and a duty, which older workers have adhered to, is not applicable to younger

⁹ Gregory Miller, "Place, Space, Pace, and Power: The Struggle for Control of the Automobile Factory Shop Floor 1896-2006," (PhD diss, The University of Toledo, 2008).

¹⁰ Editorial, "Revolt of the Robots," *The New York Times*, March 7, 1972.

¹¹ Ibid

workers, and the concepts of the younger labor force must be taken into account.”¹² The conflict at Lordstown also fit into a contemporary discussion by elites “rediscovering” the white working-class following the success of George Wallace and Richard Nixon in the 1968 presidential election.¹³ In a column titled “Ethnics and their Awakening to Identity,” Colman McCarthy wrote, “There was GM, a company that had spent tens of millions of dollars advertising its cars as symbols of the carefree, glamorous, stay-loose style of life. Suddenly the ethnic worker on the assembly lines says that is what he wants too; no more boring cramping work that makes a human being an extension of a machine.”¹⁴

Journalists who followed the automotive industry, meanwhile, focused on the strike’s implications for the automakers. They understood that the Vega was not an ordinary car, but a new subcompact “import fighter,” touted since 1968 as GM’s answer to the rising challenge of Volkswagen, Datsun (Nissan), and Toyota. Accused by consumer activists of building shoddy, dangerous, polluting, and over-priced cars, GM saw the Vega as a chance to demonstrate its ability to thrive in the automotive marketplace despite new overseas competition and increased regulation by the federal government. The tens of millions invested by GM in the Vega’s assembly line, for robotic welders, automated assembly systems, and computerized quality control, promised both improved quality and a productivity boom for the automotive industry as a whole. Industry journalist Jerry Flint wrote in the *New York Times*, “A failure at Lordstown, some officials in the automobile industry believe, could mean a step towards

¹² “The Spreading Lordstown Syndrome,” *Business Week*, March 4 1972.

¹³ Contemporary studies on the white ethnic working-class and their political alienation from the liberalism of the Democratic Party include Andrew Levison, *The Working-Class Majority* (New York: Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan, 1974); *The World of the Blue Collar Worker*, ed. Irving How (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1972); Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1972). For the formation of this group as a coherent entity see Lizabeth Cohen, *Making A New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Coleman McCarthy, “Ethnics and their Awakening to Identity,” *Washington Post*, Mary 27, 1972.

ending production in the United States of vehicles designed to compete with imports.”¹⁵

In her study *Paradise Lost*, journalist (and member of the famed banking family) Emma Rothschild wrote of the “ominous similarity,” both “simultaneously financial, social, political, psychological,” between the competitive pressures facing the domestic American automotive industry and the “late-nineteenth century decline of the British railroads.”¹⁶ Both industry groups once led the world in technological sophistication and competitive vigor, only to slip into decline. The Vega and Lordstown exemplified what Rothschild saw as an example of the “industrial inertia” and “overcommitment of capital” plaguing an industry that had sunk billions into plants and equipment, only to achieve declining yearly returns on investment.¹⁷ The strike at Lordstown brought into question not only the commitment of post-war workers to assembly line; it also challenged the strategic repose by “Big Three” executives to the challenges facing American automakers.¹⁸

Subsequent scholarly research has extended the journalist’s initial analyses. One argument in the literature links Lordstown to a series of previous and subsequent workers caucuses/strikes, including the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movements (DRUM 1968), wildcat strikes in 1970 by members of the National Postal Workers Union and the United Mineworkers of America, and the formation of Teamsters for a Democratic Union

¹⁵ Jerry Flint, “UAW and GM Agree on Ending Vega Plant Strike,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 1972.

¹⁶ Emma Rothschild, *Paradise Lost: The Decline of the Auto-Industrial Age* (New York: Random House, 1973), 176-186.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁸ The Big Three were the dominant players in the car and truck industry, General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler. It is important to note that the American Motors Corporation (AMC) remained in business during this time-period, albeit in a perennially lagging position. The market share of these three firms in 1971 gives an idea of GM’s market power: GM (44.2 percent), Ford (24.2 percent), Chrysler (14 percent), AMC (2.9 percent), and imported cars, (14.8 percent). See table 8.1 in James Zetka Jr, *Militancy, Market Dynamics, and Workplace Authority: The Struggle over Labor Process Outcomes in the U.S. Automobile Industry 1946 to 1973* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 189-190.

(1976). In each instance, young union members took unauthorized direct action in response to both traditional workplace grievances like speedups, poor pay, dangerous conditions, and a lack of “rank and file” representation in union politics. This combination, Shelia Cohen and Peter Herman argue, had at its center the larger purpose of increasing the democratic, inclusive, and responsive decision-making within the union movement or “social movement unionism.”¹⁹ The process of democratization is at the center of Richard Moser’s argument: the 1972 Lordstown strike, he says, marked the beginning of a larger movement by the plant’s workers that “evolved from a sharp struggle to limit management’s power to a more positive assertion of rights-including the right to control jobs as if there were the property of workers.”²⁰ Another narrative sees the strike as a traditional understanding of labor-management conflict over workplace control.²¹ Heather Ann Thompson, for instance, emphasizes the continuity of the 1972 strike with earlier examples of UAW activism. Unlike DRUM and other African American-led workers groups, the Lordstown strike had the International’s sanction and was resolved through the normal channels, she says: worker grievances, negotiation with management by union representatives, a strike, and a settlement.²² In a sense, Chevrolet President John Z DeLorean was correct when he said, “Sure, young workers were

¹⁹ Sheila Cohen, “The 1968-1974 Labor Upsurge in Britain and America: A Critical History of What Might Have Been,” *Labor History* 49, no. 4 (November 2008): 398-403. These linkages were first developed by Peter Herman, “In the Heart of the Heart of the Country,” *Root and Branch: The Rise of the Workers’ Movements*, ed. Jeremy Brecher, Rick Burns, Elizabeth Long, Paul Mattick Jr, Peter Rachleff (Greenwich CT: Fawcett, 1975), 48-70. The interviews done for “In the Heart of the Heart of the Country” were originally conducted for the documentary film *Loose Bolts?* directed by Peter Schlaifer, Merrimack Films, 1972. See also Theodore Urton, “Affluence and Alienation: A Case Study of the Lordstown Vega Strike,” (masters thesis, California State University-Chico, 1973). For an overview of the Revolutionary Union Movements see Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin *Detroit I Do Mind Dying Updated Edition*, (Detroit: South End Press, 1998).

²⁰ Richard Moser, “Autoworkers at Lordstown: Workplace Democracy and American Citizenship,” in *The World the Sixties Made: Politics and Culture in Recent America*, ed. Van Gosse and Richard Moser (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 303.

²¹ Thompson, “Auto Workers, Dissent, and the UAW,” 200-202.

²² Ibid, 206.

rebellious against the system in America. But not at Lordstown. What was taking place was a classical confrontation of union and management over the oldest issue in the history of auto-labor relations—a work speed-up.”²³

The argument over the precise motivations of Lordstown strikes is valuable, but it does not capture their full importance. In particular, the current literature does not place the strike within the wrenching political-economic changes sweeping through the United States in the early 1970s. In the historiography of the post-World War II United States, the early 1970s appears as a continuation of the New Deal Order’s violent unraveling during “the Sixties.” This view has merit. In early 1972, the structures underpinning the post-war system -- America’s hegemony over the world economy, the Bretton Woods monetary structure, and a social consensus that celebrated material “progress” while disregarding environmental costs and social inequalities -- lay in disarray. In its place, the literature emphasizes the fragmentation of class-based liberalism during the “rights revolution” into “identity politics” driven by race and gender. The disarray among liberals became fertile soil for the rise of the New Right as the politics of racial “backlash” diffused from the South to the North. The fragmentation of the liberal coalition, if not the cohesive conservative ideology of Ronald Reagan, became clear in Richard Nixon’s 1972 re-election.²⁴

²³ J Patrick Wright, *On A Clear Day You Can See General Motors: John Z DeLorean’s Look Inside the Automotive Giant* (Grosse Point, MI: Wright Enterprises, 1979), 169.

²⁴ The standard general survey for this period is James T Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). The key general historiography are the essays published in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle., eds, *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). The best survey of the 1970s is Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo, 2001), and the older, but still useful, Peter N Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: America in the 1970s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1982, 1990). For a condemnation of just about everything that happened during the decade, see David Frum, *How We Got Here: The 70’s: The Decade that Brought You Modern Life - - For Better or Worse* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). The standard treatment on

The focus in the scholarly literature on the disintegration of old institutions and the creation of new ones, however, obscures existing organizations' attempts to adapt themselves to the changes in the economic, political, and social environment. This focus on adaptation extends the "organizational synthesis" of American history beyond the creation of modern bureaucratic institutions into the struggle by the same institutions to change and adapt over time.²⁵ In 1972, despite the challenges that they faced, both General Motors and the United Automobile Workers still commanded sophisticated organizations, tremendous economic power, and strong political connections that endured from the New Deal era. The story of workers at Lordstown shares similar themes. Working-class culture in Ohio's Mahoning Valley emerged from a long history of confrontation with capital, adapting, but not disappearing, in the early 1970s. Further complicating matters was the muddled economic of the Nixon administration as exemplified by the New Economic Policy (NEP). Announced on August 1 1971, the NEP contributed to the problem of slowing growth and rising inflation by avoiding the difficult, but necessary, task of setting economic priorities in the name of political expediency.²⁶ Each of the organizations directly or indirectly involved in the strike

"backlash" in national politics is Thomas and Mary Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: WW Norton, 1991). For the grass-roots origins of the New Right, Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

²⁵Louis Galambos, "The Emerging Organizational Synthesis in Modern American History," *Business History Review* 44, no 3 (Autumn 1970): 279-290. For an organizational approach to the 1950s see Robert Griffith, "Dwight D Eisenhower and the Corporate Commonwealth," *American Historical Review* 87, no. 1 (February 1982): 67-122. The standard monographic example of these methods is Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

²⁶ This argument is in the vein of Judith Stein's *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy, and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1998.), 229-273. Stein places the pivotal moment in the debate between industrial policy and deindustrialization in the steel industry at the end of the 1970s rather than at the beginning of the decade. I would argue that, given the levels of post-Watergate distrust in government, the ascendant political-economic power of the Sunbelt, and the failure of the Nixon administration's economic strategy, the "industrial policy window" was already closed.

followed the standard practices that they had guided to maturity during the post-war period.

From a structural point of view, it is difficult to characterize what happened at Lordstown as an outright failure. All the parties achieved acceptable results (at least in the short-term): Nixon won re-election in the fall of 1972, the UAW fought for its members against management's excesses, workers affirmed their solidarity, and GM management retained control of its factory and built a steady stream of Vegas.

Examining the *process* that achieved these results, however, reveals a group of systems, from economic policymaking to product design and labor negotiations, cracking under internal and external stress, and devolving into *ad hoc* compromises. In this narrative, the Chevrolet Vega, ironically advertised as "the little car that does everything well," becomes a symbol for a system of production that seemed to do nothing right.

Examining the fault-lines that slowly crippled the Big Three also reveals much about the larger period between the New Deal Order's shattering in 1968 and the New Right's triumph in 1980. It was *not* a blind march by labor, business, or political leaders towards what David Halberstam called "The Reckoning."²⁷ General Motors, the UAW, and the workers at Lordstown Assembly were *conscious* of the need for a new framework regarding everything from labor relations to national economic policy, but they were deeply *conflicted* over what form these new arrangements should take. One discontented factory in northeast Ohio represented, ultimately, the breakdown of policymaking at the highest levels.

²⁷ For an understanding of conventional wisdom regarding the decline of the American auto industry, see David Halberstam, *The Reckoning* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 42-63.

My thesis's argument consists of four parts. The first section, "Power and Production" examines the challenges facing the United Automobile Workers, General Motors, and the Nixon Administration at the beginning of the 1970s. The second section, "The Vega and Lordstown," details how, in response to industry and macro-economic pressures, General Motors developed the Vega and the advanced manufacturing system integrated for the first time at Lordstown Assembly. It also addresses the deep-rooted traditions of working-class life in the Mahoning Valley and how these structures shaped the outlook and behavior of plant employees. The third section, "Instruments of Confrontation," traces the institutional development of the Lordstown adversaries, the Chevrolet assembly Local 1112 and the General Motors Assembly Division. This chapter then traces how the confrontation between these two organizations over line-speed and product quality escalated through a "work to rule" campaign, mutual recriminations over alleged "sabotage" and "defective products," to strike action and an inconclusive resolution. In the fourth section, "Lessons Not Learned," my thesis examines how the strike influenced the evolving labor-capital relationship at Lordstown, the competitive failure of the Vega, and the slow-motion collapse of both General Motors and the United Automobile Workers. Finally, the conclusion "The Tragedy of the American Automobile Industry" summarizes my thesis' findings and examines Lordstown in light of current events. The shattering of the company, the union, and the world they created together, under the final hammer blow of fiscal crises, is the tragedy of our times.

Power and Production: Cars, Labor, Capital and the State

*“The nation’s output of automobiles for the day-controlled and masterminded in Detroit- had already begun, the tempo of production revealed in a monster Goodyear signboard at the car-jammed confluence of Edsel Ford and Walter Chrysler Freeways. In figures five feet high, and reading like a giant odometer, the current year’s car production was recorded minute by minute . . .”*²⁸

In 1971, the year before the Lordstown strike, popular novelist Arthur Hailey published his sixth book, *Wheels*. The book offered a snapshot of the automobile industry that loosely traced the launching of a fictional new automobile, the “Orion,” and took the reader into the “secret,” world of designing, building, advertising, and selling cars. An “airplane novel” with pulpy prose, cutout characters, and a healthy dose of sex and violence, *Wheels* nonetheless was a timely artifact of an era when all of America’s possibilities, and problems, seemed somewhere further “down the line.” In 1971, the year before the Lordstown strike, American’s owned 92.7 million passenger cars, and purchased 8.5 million new vehicles with a wholesale value of \$21 billion.²⁹

²⁸ Arthur Hailey, *Wheels* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 6.

²⁹ See Louis P Cain, “Motor Vehicle Registrations, By Vehicle Type: 1900-1995” and *ibid* “Motor-Vehicle Factory Sales, By Vehicle Type: 1900-1996,” in *Historical Statistics of the United States, Millennial Edition, Volume 4, Economic Sectors*, eds edited by Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, Michael R. Haines, Alan L. Olmstead, Richard Sutch, Gavin Wright (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 830-831.

The automotive industry had lost much of the glamour of the 1920s, when Henry Ford's River Rouge complex was the wonder of industrial modernity. Yet, even in 1971, visitors still made the pilgrimage to "The Rouge," following a familiar pathway from ore boats to the blast furnaces, the foundry, the stamping plant, and final assembly. The Rouge still built 880 Mustangs every day, each comprised of 13,00 parts, every one another tick on the Goodyear billboard, reassuring the good citizens of Detroit that all was well.³⁰

Despite the development of new growth industries in the post-war period, manufacturing cars and trucks remained a cornerstone of the American industrial economy and government policy in 1971. Each new car stood at the apex of an industrial pyramid (the "auto-complex") that stretched from the Northeast through the Midwest: parts and subassemblies, machine tools, and the "basic industries" of steel, rubber, and chemicals. The "typical" American-made car sold for \$3000 and, according to one estimate, represented 400 hours worth of work and \$2400 worth of wages.³¹ It was not a coincidence that the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) targeted this complex in the great organizing drives of the 1930s and 1940s. Joining "the industry" became the gateway for millions to participate in the "middle class" consumer culture that defined the post-war period.³²

By 1972, when the assembly line stopped at Lordstown, all of these achievements had come into question. The high costs of the "open road" -- smog, congestion,

³⁰ William Serrin, ". . . And Watching the Fords Go By at Rouge," *The New York Times*, April 9, 1972.

³¹ "What's in a Car," *Industry Week*, October 4, 1971.

³² Base wages in the 1970 contract were \$4.50 per hour. Assuming a 40 hour work week, without layoffs or overtime, the base pay for an unskilled autoworker was \$9360 (approximately \$47,000 in 2007 dollars) All inflation adjustments in this paper created using the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis inflation-adjustment calculator. Available on-line at <http://www.minneapolisfed.org>.

landscapes vandalized by suburban sprawl, and countless accident victims --had moved from the periphery to the mainstream of American political debates.³³ The “rights revolution” of the 1960s also challenged the racism and sexism that permeated industry washrooms and boardrooms alike. Competition from imported cars and inflationary macroeconomic pressures further complicated domestic carmakers’ values and practices. In 1972, no American industry played for larger stakes or faced greater challenges in coping with a wave of political and economic change.

Autoworkers in post-war America lived in the uncertain space between the security promised by the UAW and the formidable power wielded by the “Big Three” automakers. This gap emerged following the 1945-46 GM strike. Walter Reuther, then head of the union’s GM division, was unable to force the corporation to meet the UAW’s demand for a 30 percent wage increase, combined with a price freeze on its new cars. The corporation also ignored Reuther’s demand that GM “open the books” and disclose its financial position to the union. Reuther’s attempt to extend the wartime policy of tripartite bargaining among businesses, labor, and the state over wages and prices failed when the Truman administration broke with wartime price guidelines in order to force a settlement in the steel industry.³⁴ The UAW settled for a 17.5 percent increase in wages, a little more than half of the union’s demands. The strike, however, provided Reuther with an opportunity to consolidate the UAW’s leadership in the hands of his supporters.

³³Ralph Nader, *Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed in Dangers of the American Automobile* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1965). Other critical histories of the auto-industry from this period include Edward Ayres, *What’s Good for GM* (Nashville: Aurora Publishers, 1970). John Jerome, *The Death of the Automobile: The Fatal Effect of the Golden Era, 1955-1970* (New York: WW Norton, 1972). A subsequent critical study is Brock Yates, *The Decline and Fall of the American Automobile Industry* (New York: Empire Books, 1983).

³⁴Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 225-243. Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism 1945-1968* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 27-32.

At the same time post-war conservatives stalled Truman's Fair Deal and passed the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. In the rush towards demobilization, the national mood shifted away from the activist state of the early New Deal and placed Reuther's long cherished goal of American social democracy at least temporarily out of reach.

In response, Reuther pragmatically pursued a private welfare state within the automotive industry, which he hoped would catalyze long-term economic reform. Playing Ford, Chrysler, and GM against each other as they scrambled for post-war market share, Reuther succeeded in coupling improved pay with annual cost-of-living adjustments, pensions, and company-paid health insurance. UAW contracts also included an "annual improvement factor," introduced in the 1948 GM contract. The "improvement factor" provided an additional annual wages increase based on rising productivity. In exchange, the UAW accepted GM's right to introduce new technology.³⁵ These bargaining victories became the basis for an unprecedented five-year contract, what Fortune called "The Treat of Detroit," signed between General Motors and the UAW in May 1950. The concentrated structure of the automobile industry enabled the companies to pass their higher labor costs to consumers. The UAW retained the right to strike over safety and production issues, but Reuther's focus on winning improvements in the national contract shifted the union's attention from the "daily grind" of the production line to the bargaining table.

By the early 1970s, the shift in the UAW's values, from challenging conditions on the shop floor to increasing the size of worker's paychecks, had become a cliché in

³⁵ GM-UAW 1948 Contract Section 101 (a): "To produce more with the same amount of effort is a sound economic and social object. A continuing improvement in the standard of living of employers depends upon technological progress, better tools, methods, process, and equipment and a cooperative attitude on the part of all participants in such progress." Quoted in Alfred P Sloan Jr, *My Years With General Motors*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 398.

describing contemporary labor relations. When journalist William Serrin described the 1970 GM-UAW contract talks, he said, “In automobile negotiations, as in most labor negotiations, the first items that are forgotten are the demands for improvement in working conditions, demands that would change the nature of the relationship between union and corporation.”³⁶ The image of the comfortable, de-radicalized, “middle class” factory worker contented with the paternalistic corporation became part of GM’s managerial mythos. In early 1972, George B Morris, GM’s director of labor relations, described his impression of how a typical “\$10,000-a year” worker lived. “He lives in Flint, or one of the communities around Flint, he’s got a hell of a nice home, two-car garage . . . If affluence is too strong a word, this is certainly not a pauper society we’re talking about. This is a fellow who has aspired to material things and has them.”³⁷ This image of the contented “American workingman” provided not only a ready trope for auto industry bargaining, but a useful ally for political elites in their Cold War battle for “hearts and minds” at home and abroad.³⁸ The reality was complicated and, should politicians, managers, and the media have cared to listen, more sobering.

The conflict that emerged at Lordstown over class, power, and production, did not emerge out of a vacuum of an anomie driven “youth revolt,” but from concrete problems faced by autoworkers throughout the post-war period. Among industrial operatives, the heart of the American working class, UAW members earned wages and benefits rivaled only by their counterparts in primary metals. A 1967 sociological survey, commissioned

³⁶William Serrin, *The Company and the Union* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1973), 181.

³⁷ Quoted in Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit I Do Mind Dying*, 106. For DeLorean’s views see Wright, *On A Clear Day You Can See General Motors*, 229.

³⁸ For a discussion of the Kitchen Debate and other usages of ideas of consumption and domesticity as symbols of the triumphant “American Way of Life,” see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York: Basic Books, 1988, 1999), 10-29.

by the UAW, placed 85 percent of the union's members in "lower middle class" families based on what they consumed.³⁹ Members could afford modest versions of the homes, cars, and consumer durables that formed the basis of citizenship in what historian Lizabeth Cohen terms "the Consumers Republic."⁴⁰ But workers paid a price for the success that they earned. Despite improvements in tools and technology, building cars entailed tiresome, stressful, repetitive, and often dangerous work. There were only limited opportunities for advancement "off the line," especially for black and female union members. Layoffs and strikes could still throw a spanner in family budgets.⁴¹ On the factory floor, conflict over safety and production speed continued unabated as management sought to wring every advantage out of the contract.⁴² The codification of work rules and the grievance process *did*, however, provide a structure for UAW locals to combat company power. Rather than end the struggle by autoworkers for a better standard of living or improved working conditions, it is perhaps more accurate to say that the Treaty of Detroit systematized this conflict.

The post-war years were a triumph for General Motors and a testimony to corporate might rooted in size, technology, and the organizational sophistication of "managerial capitalism."⁴³ Between 1920 and 1924, Alfred Sloan and Pierre S. du Pont had reorganized William Durant's disparate collection of vehicle and parts manufacturers from a money-losing miscellany into a core component of the American economy. The central innovation for the automobile industry was the introduction of the "M-Form," the

³⁹ For these survey results see John Barnard, *American Vanguard: The United Auto Workers During the Reuther Years, 1935-1970* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 455.

⁴⁰ Lizabeth Cohen, *The Consumers Republic: The Politics of Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 112-165.

⁴¹ John Barnard, *American Vanguard*, 451-457.

⁴² Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, 287-292.

⁴³ For a comparative survey of the rise of managerial capitalism see Alfred Chandler, "The Emergence of Managerial Capitalism," *Business History Review* 58, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 473-503.

multi-functional, multi-divisional, structure pioneered by the Reading Railroad in the 1870s and by du Pont five decades later. This system separated line managers, who controlled design and production, from a corporate staff that oversaw the firm's grand strategies and finances. Systematized financial controls prevented a repeat of Durant's overambitious expansion plans that had nearly bankrupted the company in the first place. At the same time, Sloan's masterful engineering and management abilities ensured that the company could coordinate the competing demands for capital and strike a balance between maximizing short-term profits and dividends for shareholders, and ensuring that each division received sufficient capital for long-term investments.⁴⁴ When combined with Sloan's other innovations - - mass production with general purpose machinery, differentiated products ranging from Chevrolet to Cadillac and annual model changes that spurred consumer demand - - GM captured the leading share of the automobile market from Ford in the mid-1920s. By making its vehicles the largest, most sophisticated, and highest priced in each market category, GM translated market share into profits. Through a combination of capable management sound finance, and leading technology, GM profited even during the Great Depression. The firm served as a key component of the "Arsenal of Democracy" during World War II and reaped sizeable rewards from the consumer boom of the 1950s.⁴⁵ GM consistently earned impressive profits, peaking in

⁴⁴ For the story of GM's triumph in the 1920s, Sally Clarke, *Trust and Power: Consumers, the Modern Corporation, and the Making of the United States Automobile Market* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 109-138. For an introduction to changes in the M-form at GM over time Robert Freeland, *The Struggle for Control of the Modern Corporation: Organizational Change at General Motors, 1924-1970* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1-41. For an academic biography of Sloan as manager, David Farber, *Sloan Rules: Alfred P. Sloan and the Triumph of General Motors*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

⁴⁵ Alfred Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 459-463, Ed Cray, *Chrome Colossus: General Motors and Its Times* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 354-369

the 1955 at \$1.19 billion, a nearly 10 percent return on sales.⁴⁶ Along with Ford and Chrysler, GM left the low-price (and hence low-profit margin) market segment to smaller carmakers such as Kaiser and Nash. As these “independent” firms left the market due to mergers and bankruptcy in the 1950s, imported cars from rebuilt factories in Western Europe, especially the Volkswagen Beetle, filled the small car gap. Between 1955 and 1959, imports increased from 58,000 to 609,000 units in 1959.⁴⁷

General Motor’s first attempt to meet the renewed challenge of imported cars, the Chevrolet Corvair, encountered unexpected problems. Introduced in the 1960 model year, the Corvair was a small car with an innovative air-cooled, rear-mounted engine. However, the car developed a reputation for killing and maiming its drivers either by flipping over in sharp turns or by leaking deadly carbon monoxide into the passenger compartment. Seizing upon these flaws, an enterprising young lawyer, Ralph Nader, used the Corvair as the opening wedge for a wider attack on the auto industry. In 1965, he published his findings as *Unsafe at Any Speed*. According to Nader, the Corvair symbolized the culture of Detroit automakers, a group of firms that in his view sacrificed building safe and environmentally friendly automobiles at the altar of style and profitability. “In the making of the Corvair, there was a breakdown in this flow of both authority and initiative,” Nader wrote. “Initiative would have meant an appeal by the Corvair design engineers to top management to overrule the cost-cutters and stylists whose incursions had placed unsafe constraints on engineering choice.”⁴⁸ GM’s use of

⁴⁶ Sloan, *My Years With General Motors*, 214-215.

⁴⁷ Lawrence J White, “The American Automobile Industry and the Small Car, 1945-70,” *The Journal of Industrial Economics* 20, no. 2 (April 1972): 1184-189.

⁴⁸ Nader, *Unsafe at Any Speed*, 40.

private detectives in an attempt to discredit Nader compounded the public relations disaster by confirming the firm's reputation for arrogance.⁴⁹

General Motors's behavior in dealing with the Corvair merged with a rising national concern for pollution and unsafe products. In 1956, influential liberal economist John Kenneth Galbraith argued that "sooner rather than later our concern with the quantity of goods produced-the rate of increase in Gross National Product-would have to give way to the larger question of the quality of the life that it provided."⁵⁰ Addressing these "hidden costs" of consumer capitalism became a major thrust of liberal legislators in the mid-1960s. Notable new regulations included the National Highway Transportation Safety Act (NHTSA, 1966), which set crash safety standards, and the Air Quality Acts of 1967 and 1970, which placed limits on car emissions. The costs of regulatory compliance were substantial. In 1971 GM estimated that it spent \$55 million on industrial pollution controls, \$182 million on emissions controls for the vehicles it manufactured, and \$396 million on vehicle safety research.⁵¹ Struggles over pollution and safety, however, were only part of the structural changes taking place in the automobile industry.

On the eve of the Lordstown strike, General Motors was in an incredibly powerful position. It was the largest American corporation in terms of revenue (\$28.3 billion) and employees (773,352). The company stood second to Exxon in profits (\$2.1 billion).⁵²

Alongside a long list of vehicles and components, the company manufactured a

⁴⁹ For a discussion of the Nader affair see Cray, *Chrome Colossus*, 411-427

⁵⁰ Quoted in Robert M Collins, *More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 63. For more on the increased importance of incorporating "externalities" such as product safety, into business decisions, see Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 280-282.

⁵¹ *General Motors Sixty-Third Annual Report*, (Detroit: General Motors, 1972), 1, 10, 16, 18-19, 22.

⁵² *Ibid*, 40-44. To get sense of the firm's scale, in 2007 dollars the revenue and profit totals would be approximately \$145 billion and \$11 billion respectively.

cornucopia of other industrial products: Electro Motive Division (EMD) locomotives, Allison jet engines, Terex earthmovers, and Frigidaire appliances.⁵³ Total sales from non-automotive business were a respectable \$1.6 billion, but this represented less than 6 percent of revenue. Despite the 1960s conglomerate building fashion on Wall Street, GM's fortunes remained firmly tied to making cars and trucks. General Motors manufactured 7.8 million vehicles worldwide in 1971.⁵⁴ By every measure, the firm enjoyed a preeminent position, not only in the automobile industry, but also in the larger American economy.

However, the car market was changing. GM's Corvair disaster, along with Volkswagen's methodical establishment of a long-term presence in the American auto market, created an opening for a new round of imports.⁵⁵ Automobile imports had surged from 569,000 in 1965 to 1,487, 000 in 1971, almost 15 percent of the U.S. market.⁵⁶ As the largest domestic auto company, GM suffered a disproportionate loss of market share, slipping from 50.1 percent of the American market in 1965 to 45.2 percent in 1971. John Z DeLorean could still joke with reporters about the problem, telling a press conference, "One of our marketing guys says the best way to handle this . . . [import] thing is to hire our own fleet of submarines."⁵⁷ Imports represented a growing threat, however, to the

⁵³ The company also listed 14 divisions producing components for cars and trucks such as as Delco Electronics, Harrison Radiator, and New Departure-Hyatt Bearings. See *General Motors Sixty-Third Annual Report*, 42-43.

⁵⁴ Statistics on number of cars built see *General Motors Sixty-Third Annual Report*. For biographical surveys of the conglomerate boom see Robert Schoenberg, *Geneen* (New York: Warner Books, 1985) and Stanley H Brown, *Ling: The Rise, Fall, and Return of a Texas Titan* (New York: Atheneum, 1972).

⁵⁵ Volkswagen's success combined an excellent product, the Beetle, with a nationwide well-capitalized dealer network, and an advertising campaign that positioned the Beetle as a counter-cultural "Think Small" antidote to big American-made cars. See James M Rubenstein, *Making and Selling Cars: Innovation and Change in the U.S. Automotive Industry* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 226.

⁵⁶ Jeffery Hunker, *Structural Change in the U.S. Automobile Industry* (Lexington, Mass: Lexington Books, 1983), 17.

⁵⁷ DeLorean quoted in D.N. Williams and James Beizer "Auto Rules: A Blessing in Disguise?" *Iron Age*, March 25, 1971.

Big Threes' oligopolistic power to set prices within the American automotive industry and pass on to consumers the increasing cost of compliance with safety and pollution regulations.⁵⁸

The twin disruptions of trade policy and inflation that rocked the American economy after the 1960s compounded both the regulatory and structural problems that GM confronted. Between the late 1940s and the early 1970s, America's international economic position rested upon two complementary frameworks, the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates and the growth of free trade promoted by successive "rounds" of the Global Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT). Both of these agreements had prevented a reoccurrence of the fiscal imbalances, high tariffs, and competitive devaluations that had plagued the global economy after World War I.⁵⁹ By 1968, however, both were falling apart.⁶⁰ Linking the dollar to gold, and establishing fixed exchange rates between the world's major currencies to the dollar, Bretton Woods stabilized the international financial system. There was no mechanism, however, for the devaluation of the dollar. In 1960, the United States tumbled into recession when the Federal Reserve increased interest rates in order to defend the dollar. At the decade's beginning, John F. Kennedy tapped into the political potential of aggressive "growth economics" on the campaign trail. "My chief argument with the Republican party has been that they have not had faith in the free system," he said. "Where we would set before the American people the unfinished business of our society, this administration

⁵⁸ For a discussion of GM market share see Hunker, *Structural Change in the U.S. Automobile Industry*, 20. for a discussion on import penetration and GM quality in the late 1960s see John Rae, *The American Automobile Industry* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 122-129.

⁵⁹ Jeffrey Frieden, *Global Capitalism: Its Fall and Rise in the Twentieth Century* (New York: WW Norton, 2006), 339-360.

⁶⁰ Robert M Collins, "The Economic Crises of 1968 and the Waning of the 'American Century,'" *American Historical Review* 101, no. 2 (April 1996): 396-422.

has set ceilings and set limitations.”⁶¹ Kennedy’s program of tax cuts and increased spending transformed the cyclical economic recovery that began in 1961 into a full-fledged boom with 5 percent per annum economic growth and a 35 percent decrease in the poverty rate from 1961 to 1966.⁶² In January 1966, Lyndon Johnson reiterated Kennedy’s faith in growth economics when he declared, “We are a rich nation and can afford to make progress at home while meeting obligations abroad . . .”⁶³ In 1968, however, the dollar came under attack by speculators who sensed that monetary outflows and Vietnam War-spawned inflation would force the United States to devalue. The Johnson administration blunted the speculative offensive by creating special drawing rights (“paper gold”) and working out a fiscal compromise with Congress that imposed an income tax surcharge and cut spending.

This fiscal restraint, combined with a campaign of interest-rate increases by the Federal Reserve, pushed the economy into a recession that lasted for the first year of the Nixon administration (December 1969-November 1970).⁶⁴ The new President faced a dilemma. He could make the politically unpalatable argument that the rapid, and popular, growth economics practiced by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations was unsustainable. Slowing growth by lowering government spending and higher interest rates, would, in time, decrease the demand for imports and restore the dollar’s value. Or, Nixon could attempt an even more radical economic strategy. In order to devise a new strategy Nixon assembled his principal economic advisors at Camp David on Friday,

⁶¹ Quoted in Theodore White, *Making of the President 1960* (New York: Pocket Books, 1961), 309.

⁶² Collins, *More*, 53; Patterson *Grand Expectations*, 467-468.

⁶³ Collins, *More*, 73

⁶⁴ National Bureau of Economic Research “Business Cycle Expansions and Contractions,” Available On-Line <http://www.nber.org/cycles/>, Accessed May 15, 2008.

August 13, 1971. Nixon announced the result of these deliberations, the New Economic Policy (NEP) in a televised address on Sunday, August 15.

Electoral politics certainly played into Nixon's calculations: his "New Majority" depended on providing the economic largess of the Democratic Party while using cultural wedge issues such as race, abortion, and drugs, to fracture the opposition.⁶⁵ Nixon's secretary of the treasury in 1971, John Connally, thought that the plans were essentially an *ad hoc* arrangement to meet the perceived crises. "Clearly, we were breaking new ground and smashing some long and dearly held protocol," he explained. "But the economy could not get much worse in 1971, and I had at least two distinct advantages: I was not limited by the old diplomacy or predictable (knee jerk) thinking."⁶⁶ In the long term, the key change made by the NEP was the closure of the "dollar window," ending the currency's convertibility into gold and finishing the Bretton Woods system. The dollar's ensuing depreciation, the administration hoped, would solve the balance-of-payments problem. Without the need to defend the dollar, the Nixon administration could embark upon a campaign of fiscal stimulus. This included lower interest rates, a "full employment budget," and tax cuts, including a repeal of the 7 percent federal excise tax on automobiles, in order to increase aggregate demand. Price controls, beginning with a 90 day wage price freeze, would stop the stimulus from creating an inflationary bidding war between producers and consumers. To meet increased demand without raising prices or paying higher wages, the plan encouraged industrial investment in

⁶⁵ Allen Matusow, *Nixon's Economy: Booms, Busts, Dollars, and Votes* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 3-4. For Nixon's pursuit of the white union members see Jefferson Cowie's "Nixon's Class Struggle: Romancing the New Right Worker, 1969-1973," *Labor History* 43, no. 3 (2002): 257-283.

⁶⁶ John Connally and Mickey Herskowitz, *In History's Shadow: An American Odyssey* (New York: Hyperion, 1993), 240.

equipment and machinery, via a 10 percent investment tax credit.⁶⁷ Herbert Stein, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors, recalled the opinion shared by Nixon advisors at Camp David: “We’re a long way from full employment, we still have a lot of room for [expanding] the economy, and the inflation rate is low.”⁶⁸ There was no vision in the NEP, however, for restructuring the American economy to meet the challenges of the 1970s.

The automobile industry was lay in the middle of the perennial American debate between the protectionism and free trade. For firms battered by import competition, such as the textile and steel industries, the standard course of action was to lobby for a combination of tariffs, quotas, or the legalized cartels created by “voluntary export agreements” (VERs). As the CEO of steel producer Allegheny Ludlum, Roger Ahlbrandt, argued, “As long as we [Americans] have a high standard of living, we will never be competitive.”⁶⁹ By contrast, exporting firms such as mining equipment builder Joy Manufacturing, argued for a continued defense of free trade and overseas investment. Joy CEO J.W. Wilcock, countered protectionist demands with the standard retort, “I don’t see how the United States or any other country can survive without recognizing its dependence on all other countries.”⁷⁰ For car makers, increased imports of cars and trucks threatened the firm’s long-term profitability. Both General Motors and Ford, however, had large networks of overseas operations, dating back to the 1920s and 1930s. These subsidiaries, created to overcome protectionist sentiments in their host countries also furthered the parent company’s goals of market segmentation and product

⁶⁷Collins, *More*, 120.

⁶⁸Matusow, *Nixon’s Economy*, 186.

⁶⁹George McManus, “The Search of America Inc,” *Iron Age*, January 6, 1972.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 107

differentiation.⁷¹ Even Chrysler, historically the member of the Big Three most focused on the domestic market, made considerable investments in European operations, expanding its production outside of North America from 46,348 vehicles in 1960 to 660,071 by 1969.⁷² In 1971, GM sold 1.5 million cars and trucks outside the United States and Canada, and earned revenues of \$4.1 billion and profits of \$103 million from these operations.⁷³ In total, the company controlled \$2.6 billion in overseas assets.⁷⁴ GM's management had no desire to foreclose further possibilities for international growth, especially in the industrializing countries of Asia and South America.

In its 1972 "Letter to Shareholders," the firm's managers argued that

General Motors sees an important part of its future in the rapidly growing overseas markets. The realization of these overseas opportunities depends to an important degree on the ability of General Motors and other American business enterprises to trade and invest throughout the world without undue restriction . . . Import quotas, limitations on further investment overseas and restrictions on the overseas use of American patents and licenses could cause trade retaliation by other countries. . .⁷⁵

Unless the auto industry was willing to abandon its overseas ambitions and profits, lobbying for outright protectionism was a counterproductive move.

Instead of lobbying for protectionism, the automakers used three strategies to address the problem of import competition. The first was the purchase of minority stakes

⁷¹ Richard Gerstenberg of General Motors described the corporation's historical strategy as the following "Direct capital investment was a broader thing than just to avoid tariffs. Type of product also figured in. For example, in Germany they were buying smaller cars years ago than we were making here. We felt the best thing we could do would be to go into Germany and build a car to the specifications of the auto buying public there. Along with it, there were some tariff disadvantages to imports (from the U.S.). There was the very expensive freight in getting the car over there." "Interview with Richard Gerstenberg," *Ward's Auto World*, December 1971.

⁷² Between 1960 and 1969, Chrysler's sales outside of North American increased from 3.9 to 27.1 percent of the company's vehicles sold. Sales figures in Charles K Hyde *Riding the Roller Coaster: A History of the Chrysler Corporation* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 197-201.

⁷³ *General Motors Sixty-Third Annual Report*, (Detroit: General Motors, 1972), 14. The largest of these operations were Opel in Germany, Vauxhall in Britain, and Holden in Australia.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 33.

⁷⁵ *General Motors Corporation Sixty-Fourth Annual Report* (Detroit: General Motors Corporation, 1973), 3.

in the smaller Japanese automakers, mirroring carmakers' earlier penetration of the European market. In 1971 Chrysler bought 15 percent of Mitsubishi and General Motors purchased a 34 percent stake in Japanese truck maker Isuzu. In 1972, Ford failed in an attempt to buy 20 percent of Mazda's parent company Toyo Kogyo.⁷⁶ The second part of the approach was reducing fixed costs in the business. By 1971, General Motors, for example had reduced its total parts list from 318,000 to 272,000 items.⁷⁷ A related strategy to decrease costs and maintain profit margins was increased assembly-line productivity. Given the taint of the "speed-up" GM was careful in publicizing its strategy. Chair James Roche declared "Productivity is not speedups or sweat shops. Productivity improvement is a result of innovation, of new and better products and product designs of better tools and equipment, of advanced methods and procedures. All of this is possible because there are risk-takers willing to invest savings in the hope of profit."⁷⁸ Finally, the major manufacturers (with the exception of financially struggling Chrysler) introduced a new generation of small "import fighters," a generation of vehicles that became icons for all the wrong reasons: the Ford Pinto, AMC Gremlin and the Chevy Vega.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Rubenstein, *Making and Selling Cars*, 345

⁷⁷ Jerry Flint, "Crossroads for the Automobile," *New York Times*, April 4, 1971. Chrysler pursued similar parts reduction initiative; see "Chrysler Reversing Parts Proliferation," *Industry Week*, April 10, 1972.

⁷⁸ "Roche Discusses Diminishing Rate of Productivity," *Automotive News*, November 8 1971.

⁷⁹ See Jerry Flint, "For Autos, Troubles Piling Up From Showroom to Union Hall," February 1, 1970, *New York Times*.

The Vega and Lordstown: Product, Technology, and Place

On October 3, 1968, at the opening of the new GM Building in New York, Chairman Roche announced that the company would build a new car, code-named the XP-887, in the United States. It was an unprecedented gesture; GM had never announced a new model in advance, much less two years ahead of its planned introduction. While Roche denied any connection between corporate strategy and government policy, commentators noted that two weeks earlier Assistant Secretary of the Treasury John R. Petty had chided the automobile industry on its unwillingness to build a competitive small car and that would help the United States with its balance-of-payments deficit.⁸⁰ Roche proclaimed that the XP-887 would weight less than 2,000 pounds and sell for the same price as the Volkswagen Beetle.⁸¹ In another break with GM tradition, the development of the XP-887 proceeded as a corporate project spearheaded by executive-vice president Ed Cole and Bill Mitchell, rather than being developed within the company's divisional engineering structure. DeLorean, the man responsible for bringing the XP-887 to market, was not impressed with the result. He disliked the engine design, describing it later as a "relatively large, noisy, top-heavy, combination of aluminum and

⁸⁰ Cray, *Chrome Colossus*, 469.

⁸¹ "The new small car will be slightly longer than the most popular imported car and superior in comfort, roominess, performance and style. A new aluminum engine and simplified maintenance characteristics will help make this car an outstanding value for customers preferring smaller cars." See *General Motors Corporation Sixty First Annual Report* (Detroit: General Motors, 1970), 10.

iron which cost far too much to build, [and] looked like it had been taken off a 1920 farm tractor.”⁸² He thought that the name for the new car, the Vega, “sounded like a disease or a fungus.”⁸³ The final prototype, rolled out on August 6, 1970, was 382 pounds heavier than the Beetle and cost \$311 dollars more.⁸⁴ Despite problems, the Vega remained an important part of General Motors’ product line-up. In their 1970 “Letter to Shareholders,” President Cole and Chairman Roche took the unusual step of touting the Vega as an “American-built” “formidable competitor” to the imports.⁸⁵ Faced with high expectations, DeLorean, and GM advertising spun the botched development process as best they could. Chevrolet used the Vega’s weight gain as a marketing ploy, and advertised the heavier vehicle as having greater stability in the wind and a smoother ride than the imports. It was sold as “the little car that does everything well.”⁸⁶ Befitting the Vega’s highly publicized development, the factory selected for the new car was the newest in GM’s manufacturing system, Lordstown Assembly. GM saw the development of Lordstown as a concerted attempt to increase production and quality by addressing all of the technological “bottlenecks” in automobile manufacturing. After World War II, GM and Ford embraced capital-intensive “Detroit Automation,” that combined multi-functional tools and automatic transfer machines that fabricated components, such as engine blocks and cylinder heads, by automatically moving metal pieces through a

⁸² Wright, *On A Clear Day You Can See General Motors*, 163.

⁸³ Ibid, 165.

⁸⁴ “GM Opens Detroit’s New Battle With Mini-Imports” *New York Times*, August 6 1970, 66; Wright, *On A Clear Day You Can See General Motors*, 166. The baseline price for a Vega was \$2090 (\$10,700 adjusted for inflation in 2007 dollars).

⁸⁵ *General Motors Corporation Sixty Second Annual Report*, (Detroit: General Motors, 1971), 7.

⁸⁶ “Chevy’s New Little Car is Open for Business,” General Motors, Advertisement, *Life Magazine*, September 11, 1970.

sequence of machining operations.⁸⁷ This enabled the automotive industry to increase production by 90 percent between 1947 and 1963 while decreasing its workforce by 9 percent.⁸⁸ Automobile assembly, however, resisted automation. For example, it took the dexterity and intelligence of a human welder to work within a vehicle's frame and adjust the pattern of welds to the different body styles of each car on the line. Therefore, manufacturers turned to mandatory overtime in order to increase production. At Lordstown, GM engineers used a combination of technology to overcome these problems. From the beginning, GM engineers designed the Vega for high-speed manufacturing through the application of what GM called Computerized Total Systems Engineering. This system accelerated the assembly process by reducing and simplifying the number of parts (from 3,500 on the Chevrolet Impala to 1,231 on the Vega). For example, GM replaced multi-layered cloth seats with a single-piece bucket seat made out of foam.⁸⁹ Lordstown's signature manufacturing system, however, was the Unimate welding robot. Using Record-Playback (R/P) technology that enabled the robot to function in the 3-D space of a car frame, the 26 robots on the line performed 95 percent of 3,900 welds on the Vega.⁹⁰ Linking the Unimates to the production line were an automated sensing system, high-precision jigs, and an "accuracy rail" on the 1.25 mile

⁸⁷Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 130-135.

⁸⁸ Statistics from Ronald Edsforth "Why Automation Didn't Shorten the Work Week: The Politics of Work Time in the Automobile Industry," *Autowork*, ed. Robert Asher and Ronald Edsforth (Albany: State University of New York Press: 1995), 166.

⁸⁹ Urton, "Affluence and Alienation," 43-44.

⁹⁰ For a discussion of the Unimate Record-Playback technology see David F Noble, David F Noble, *Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 187-188. Joseph Engelberger, President of Unimation, not surprisingly took a great deal of pleasure in successful introduction of his company's machines at Lordstown. He saw a great future for the technology "Our new machines will be more adept and their moving line capabilities will permit mixing the machines with workers on the same assembly lines" see "Top Quality of Vegas Attributed to Unimate Use," *Ward's Auto World*, May 1971.

track that moved the cars along the line.⁹¹ GM also integrated computers into the production process. One system, the Product Assurance and Control System (PACS) alerted workers, and foremen, when inspectors noticed defects from a production area on the line. Another, ALPACA (Assembly Line Production and Control Activity), monitored the line speed.⁹² Even the railcars for transporting completed automobiles to dealerships were custom-designed "Vert-A-Pac" models, sealed against theft and vandalism, and capable of carrying 30 Vegas apiece.⁹³

All of these advancements in product design, robotics, computers, and specialized equipment, however, were still dependent on workers to function. The Unimates still required a human assembler to clamp the sheet metal into the appropriate jigs. As Lordstown production manager Victor Sutt acknowledged, the line's high-speed magnified the problem of defects and risked an "accumulation of repairs [at the end of the line] that could shut us down."⁹⁴ Despite the quality controls built into the product and the machinery that built it, GM executives appeared blind to the role of "human engineering" at Lordstown. It was at this last, critical, stage, that General Motors' plans began to fail. The corporation's management operated in a world of big money, high politics and sweeping technological change. The workers at Lordstown Assembly came from their own world, no less intricate than that on the 14th floor of the GM Building, but built upon markedly different values from the corporation that employed them.

While Lordstown Assembly emerged from the nexus of cutting-edge political economics, automation technology, and corporate strategy, the conflict that defined the

⁹¹ Tom Alexander, "The Hard Road to Soft Automation," *Fortune*, July 1971; Jerry M Flint. "Auto Industry Struggling to Stop Lag in Productivity," *The New York Times*, August 8, 1970.

⁹² Emma Rothschild, *Paradise Lost*, 111.

⁹³ "Small Autos Ride on End in Rail Car," *The New York Times*, June 29, 1969.

⁹⁴ D.N. Williams, "Lordstown Plant: GM's New Mark of Excellence?" *Iron Age*, March 11, 1971.

factory's history began in the crucible of the steel mills that lined the Mahoning River Valley between Warren and Youngstown, Ohio. In 1916, a speed-up accelerated by war orders and a labor shortage pushed exhausted steel workers to organize and strike two of the Valley's big mills: Republic Steel and Youngstown Sheet and Tube (YST). On January 7, company guards opened fire on the picketers, killing eight, and wounding twelve. The assembled crowd rioted. The ensuing disorder left over a million dollars in property smashed and burnt; one hundred people were wounded in the fighting.⁹⁵ After a truce during the boom years of the 1920s, the Great Depression brought renewed labor activism. During the "Little Steel" strike in 1937, the Valley raged with conflict between the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) and the managers of Republic Steel and YST. The agitation culminated on June 19, 1937 when company police killed two strikes and injured twenty-three others in a clash outside Republic Steel.⁹⁶ Union recognition in 1942 and the postwar prosperity created an uneasy truce between labor and management in the mills. While steel workers struck repeatedly in the post-war period, collective bargaining dissipated the raw violence that had marked earlier conflicts.

The CIO did not transform the Mahoning Valley into an industrial paradise, but industrial unionism did affirm a core of working-class values that endured into the 1970s. Despite the steelworkers' gains in wages and benefits, life in the mills remained exhausting, dirty, and dangerous. Mediating this toil were both the monetary incentives and the camaraderie built among workers as they talked and rested between "heats" of

⁹⁵ Raymond Boryczka and Lorin Lee Cary, *No Strength Without Union: An Illustrated History of Ohio Workers 1803-1980* (Columbus: The Ohio State Historical Society, 1982), 139; Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo, *Steeltown U.S.A.: Work and Memory Youngstown* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 28-29; *The WPA Ohio Guide* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1940), 61.

⁹⁶ Linkon and Russo, *Steeltown U.S.A.*, 38-40.

hot metal.⁹⁷ Prejudice reinforced these solidarities as management and workers created labor gangs segregated by ethnicity and race.⁹⁸ In the world outside the mills, images ranging from religious sculptures to company calendars and newspaper advertisements celebrated a heroic vision of the white, male industrial worker.⁹⁹ Even if their fathers and grandfathers preferred not to talk about the “bad old days,” before the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), Lordstown employees lived in a world steeped in working-class consciousness and took from it cultural norms that they carried with them onto the production line. Anthropologist David Moberg, who observed the Lordstown conflict, summarized the difference that workers perceived between assembling cars and making steel. “On the line the work was constant, repetitive, simple, and mechanically paced. In the mill, the work was often dirty, hot and hard, but it was episodic and paced according to a rhythm of intense work, then periods of very light work . . . There was greater variety [working in a steel mill], requiring alertness, and generally more of an opportunity to use and develop skills and initiative.”¹⁰⁰ The men and, by 1970, women who worked “on the line” at Lordstown came from a community that equated a solid paycheck with undertaking demanding, even dangerous, industrial work. At the same time, however, it was acceptable within the community for workers to demand a “reasonable” pace of work and “dignified” treatment by management in exchange for their toil. The young assemblers at Lordstown might have preferred marijuana to beer and castoff fatigues to dungarees; but, nonetheless, they were still the children of fire,

⁹⁷ Robert Bruno, *Steelworker Alley: How Class Works in Youngstown* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁹⁸ Bruce Nelson. *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁹⁹ Linkon and Russo, *Steeltown U.S.A.*, 88-118.

¹⁰⁰ Moberg, “Rattling the Golden Chains,” 99-100

steel, and industrial strife. The values that young workers inherited provided vital cultural ballast that sustained them in their confrontation with GM.

Instruments of Confrontation: Local 1112, GMAD and the 1972 Strike

The conflict between the values of workers in the Youngstown-Warren area and General Motors' standard management philosophy became apparent as soon as Lordstown Assembly opened on April 28, 1966. The corporation imported foremen, the crucial link between management and the hourly workers, from existing GM plants. This decision had two important consequences. First, the transplants brought with them what one veteran foreman described as GM's philosophy of "toughness" in dealings between supervisors and production workers. The ideal foreman could not "let the people [he managed] know he is in agreement with them. If he is in sympathy with the people, he is dead as a foreman or as a supervisor. He's lost the ballgame as far as conducting his job satisfactorily as a member of management."¹⁰¹ Second, bringing in outside foremen took away the clearest avenue of promotion from the assembly line and into management. General Motors thus inadvertently channeled the energies and sympathies of ambitious young workers away from the company and into union activism. Like GM, the UAW brought its own veteran members into the new plant and began organizing. After token resistance from GM, Lordstown workers established UAW Local 1112 on June 9, 1966.¹⁰² From the beginning, the plant was a site of labor-management conflict.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in *Loose Bolts?*, directed by Peter Schlaifer, Merrimack Films, 1972

¹⁰² Moberg, "Rattling the Golden Chains," 96.

Conditions on the assembly line readily demonstrated the need for worker organization in order to combat GM's otherwise pervasive power. Gary Bryner was one of the original hires in 1966 and became the President of Local 1112 in 1970. He described the conditions in the plant between 1968 and 1969: "I don't give a shit what anybody says, it was boring, monotonous work."¹⁰³ As on other assembly lines, workers sought to make the deadening routine bearable by using various "unauthorized" strategies that tried to humanize the speed of production. "He (the worker) had to have some time. The best way is to slow down the pace. He might want to open up a book, he might want to smoke a cigarette, or he might want to walk two or three steps away to get a drink of water."¹⁰⁴ As foremen sought to establish workplace discipline, the engine of conflict at Lordstown revved up. As Bryner described it, the workers "started fighting like hell to get the work off him. He thought he wasn't obliged to do more than his normal share."¹⁰⁵ A series of wildcat strikes between 1966 and early 1970 marked a period of negotiation between union officials and plant management over what constituted an adequate balance between production speed and worker endurance.

In studying the labor activism of Local 1112, however, it is important to note that the conduct of the Local's routine affairs had far more in common with a VFW Post than with any form of "labor radicalism."¹⁰⁶ Union meetings began with the Pledge of

¹⁰³ Quoted in Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (New York: The New Press, 1972, 1974), 189.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 189

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 189

¹⁰⁶ Lordstown hired its first female assembler, Wilma Rhodes, in the summer of 1970. See "Minutes of August 9, 1970 Regular Membership Meeting," Local 1112 Collection, Box 3, Folder 5, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University. Before then, women had worked at the plant, but in unorganized, "pink collar," clerical and secretarial positions. By 1973, there were 270 female members of UAW Local 1112. Total membership was 8588 (270 women, 7725 unskilled men, and 593 skilled trades. The skilled trades positions remained all male). See "Lordstown Plant Description," Local 1112 Collection, Box 8, Folder 16, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

Allegiance and proceeded according to Robert's Rules of Order.¹⁰⁷ Much of the local's business in the year before the strike appears mundane. On March 9, 1971, for example three Trumbull County Commissioners listened to member complaints on "the atrocious state of roads on the area [of the plant] . . . and the general traffic problem at Lordstown."¹⁰⁸ Following this discussion, Executive Board members debated the merits of Xerox and IBM photocopiers. On December 21, 1971, the Executive Board first debated whether to pursue an auto insurance plan for members with a local broker, and then noted a letter from the Red Cross about upcoming blood drives.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, the dedication of the Union's leadership to orderly debate and bureaucratic procedure sometimes rivaled that of its management opponents. On April 18, 1972, after the strike, the Board dismissed a proposed company-union softball league with the following statement: "Since our league is already organized, we do not intend to affiliate with Management's program. Particularly since this Local was not contacted prior to Management's notice in the plant."¹¹⁰ Given the business conducted, it is perhaps not surprising that General Meetings, requiring a quorum of all members to make decisions, featured end-of-meeting "must be present to win" door prizes such a wrench set, \$10, and new tires.¹¹¹ This is not to say that the leadership of Local 1112 lacked commitment to their member's welfare or that they took a narrow-minded "pork chop" approach to the problems they faced. Rather, all of the evidence suggests that Local 1112's officers were

¹⁰⁷ This observation is based on the survey of the minutes taken for Executive Board and General Membership meetings for UAW Local 1112 from February 1971 to March 1972.

¹⁰⁸ "Minutes of March 9, 1971 Executive Board Meeting," David C Pool, Recording Secretary, Local 1112 Collection, Box 6, Folder 8, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

¹⁰⁹ "Minutes of December 21, 1971 Executive Board Meeting," Local 1112 Collection, Box 3, Folder 7, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

¹¹⁰ "Minutes of April 8, 1971 Executive Board Meeting," Local 1112 Collection, Box 3, Folder 8, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

¹¹¹ For list of door prizes see "Minutes of the February 21, 1971 General Membership Meeting," Local 1112 Collection, Box 6, Folder 8, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

committed to achieving workplace dignity within the labor-management framework created by the UAW and GM in the post-war period.

The routine of union life did not mean that the rank-and-file members of Local 1112 took a passive or disinterested view of shop-floor issues. A number of problems from excessive overtime to inoperative equipment (such as broken fume vents) triggered a range of informal retaliatory actions by workers, including sit-down strikes, walkouts, and sabotage. These actions were generally limited, however, to specific work areas. On May 24, 1968, however, a falling I-beam hit a worker, leading to a plant-wide shutdown in protest. Enjoying a tight local job market in the late 1960s and having invested little time in the seniority system, workers felt that the risks of independent action were worthwhile.¹¹² Over the next few years tensions eased: by 1970, there was a tentative accommodation between labor and management. Foremen established longer-term relationships with their workers and tolerated a certain amount of “laxness” to keep production flowing. Increasingly experienced union officials, meanwhile, channeled more complaints through the formal grievance process.¹¹³ By early 1971, however, a new round of conflict had begun as Vega production began in earnest.

To make up for lost production resulting from the 1970 GM strike, the plant’s management ordered indefinite mandatory overtime. At first, the surge of overtime pay softened the grueling schedule of working six days a week for sixty to seventy hours. Getting time off from the plant’s foremen, who were anxious about meeting production targets, proved difficult. Exhaustion and frustration took their toll on workers. In the January 10, 1971, general membership meeting Paul Cubellis, the Shop Chairman of

¹¹² Moberg “Rattling the Golden Chains,” 114-121

¹¹³ Ibid, 121

Local 1112's Bargaining Committee, summarized the related problems facing members: unfilled job openings, a single worker forced to do two different jobs, insufficient "relief men" covering for workers on break, and unresolved "78 problems" (workload grievances). In order to make sure GM worked within the contract, the head of the Chevrolet Shop Committee reminded members: "Working before [the] start buzzer, don't do it."¹¹⁴ In a bit of unintended irony, the line hit the projected speed of 100 cars an hour on May 1, 1971. Sixteen days later, the local voted to authorize a strike over unresolved grievances. While a settlement averted the potential strike, Lordstown was already a plant on the edge when GMAD took over the plant's management from Chevrolet.¹¹⁵ The workers at Lordstown were right to worry about what was to come.

By the mid 1960s, General Motors Assembly Division had grown into a manufacturing behemoth tasked with driving down costs on the corporation's assembly lines. The division resulted from the 1965 merger of the corporation's industrial engineering operations and the network of Buick-Oldsmobile-Pontiac (BOP) assembly plants. Further consolidation in 1968 and 1971 merged formerly autonomous Fisher Body plants into a single management structure. Simultaneously, GMAD began standardizing parts between models.¹¹⁶ By 1972, the division controlled 75 percent of GM's car output and 65 percent of its trucks.¹¹⁷ While General Motors' managers adamantly denied any nefarious intent, industry observers viewed GMAD's formation as a *defensive* reaction to the anti-trust rumblings emanating from the Justice Department.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ "Minutes of the January 10, 1971, Regular Membership Meeting," Local 1112 Collection, Box 2, Folder 6, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

¹¹⁵ Moberg "Rattling the Golden Chains," 146-150

¹¹⁶ "Management: The Efficiency Move that Backfired," *Business Week*, March 25, 1972.

¹¹⁷ Jon Lowell, "Lowdown at Lordstown, GMAD: Jekyll or Hyde," *Ward's Auto World*, April 1972.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

Less appreciated was GMAD's role as an *offensive* unit against the waste and duplication created by the autonomous divisions. GM Vice-Chairman Thomas Murphy described the process as one that eliminated "indirect salaried people" by ending duplicate "maintenance, production, and purchasing."¹¹⁹ Because GMAD took control over assembly operations from the divisions, it created friction within the corporation. Kenneth N Scott, the Vice-President who controlled all of GM's body and assembly operations (including GMAD), wondered aloud to a reporter, "If we'd spend as much time fighting our competition as we do each other . . ." and noted "we still have potshotting going on internally."¹²⁰ In addition to "rationalizing" plant-space, parts, management, and staff, GMAD also became GM's preferred instrument for confronting the UAW over work rules and enforcing the company's commitment to "toughness."

GMAD targeted what it called "laxness," the informal arrangements worked out between plant managers and the leaders of the UAW's local unions. Kenneth Scott declared the mission of the division to work at the "edge" of the contract. "If operating on the basis of our contract and agreement is tough, then all right GMAD is tough. If stopping looseness and malpractice is tough, then yes, GMAD is tough."¹²¹ The UAW, meanwhile, saw GMAD as systematically undermining existing contracts in its plants. In response to a letter from Lordstown worker Pershing Smith, who had received a disciplinary lay-off, UAW official Frank James, described GMAD as "a parasite division" whose "only reason for existence" was to build "faster and cheaper than

¹¹⁹ "Interview with General Motors Vice-Chairman Thomas A Murphy," *Wards Automotive World*, December 1972.

¹²⁰ Jon Lowell, "Lowdown at Lordstown," 31.

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 49.

Chevrolet, Fisher, Pontiac, Oldsmobile, or Cadillac.”¹²² In the eyes of the International, the confrontation that emerged at Lordstown was “completely predictable” as the new management sought to “eliminate manpower, violate production standard settlements, increase discipline and, in general, harass the employees working in the plant.”¹²³ By 1972, what the union saw as an ongoing campaign for “more production with less people,” had reached the “critical stage,” not only at Lordstown, but also at Norwood, Ohio, Willow Run, Michigan, and St. Louis, Missouri.¹²⁴ The time had come for a showdown with GMAD and the division’s manager, Joseph E Godfrey.

If DeLorean was General Motors’ longhaired “token hippie,” the crew-cut Godfrey epitomized GM’s traditional labor-management practices. Godfrey told a *New York Times* reporter, “Within reason and without endangering their health, if we can occupy a man for 60 minutes we’ve got that right.”¹²⁵ A second-generation “GM man,” his father had been president of Frigidaire. He began his career at Delco in 1937 and then transferred in 1940 to Saginaw Steering Gear, another GM manufacturing subsidiary. After becoming the division’s head in 1964, he earned promotion to general manager of GMAD in 1968. Godfrey worked the corporation’s customary 12-hour days and enjoyed, in his words, “communing with nature” on a spread in northern Michigan that he shared with “a bulldozer, two tractors, a snowmobile, two boats, two Honda [motorcycles], and a trap range.”¹²⁶ Godfrey had little sympathy with bored or alienated workers. “There are some guys who don’t like assembly-line jobs but then some of them don’t like any job

¹²² “Letter to Pershing E Smith from Frank James,” January 20, 1972 , Irving Bluestone Correspondence, Box 44, Folder 11, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Agis Salpukas, “GM’s Toughest Division ‘Binbuster?,”” *New York Times*, April 16, 1972.

¹²⁶ Robert M Finlay, “Editors Forum: Interview With Joseph E Godfrey,” *Automotive News*, October 4, 1971.

anywhere.”¹²⁷ He was not afraid of strikes. Of the six plants that GMAD took over after 1968, each subsequently struck for periods ranging from a few days to 3 months. In Godfrey’s view, it was better to suffer the temporary losses caused by a strike rather than accept contractual “featherbedding” that “might haunt you forever.”¹²⁸ As far as Godfrey was concerned, it appears that Lordstown was not the standard-bearer for anything except the kind of “laxity” that he intended to hammer out of the GMAD system.

The confrontation began in earnest on October 1, 1971, when GMAD took control of Lordstown and merged the Fisher Body and Chevrolet divisions. In the process, the new management fired between 300 and 800 workers.¹²⁹ GMAD argued that these workers were “surplus” in a merged operation. As one corporation spokesperson stated, “Under the old system we had a payroll department for Fisher Body and another for Chevrolet. Now we have one payroll department with one less computer and so on.”¹³⁰ Other “extra” workers included quality-control technicians responsible for troubleshooting the Vega’s new assembly process.¹³¹ For the already exhausted Lordstown assemblers, however, the increase in workload for the remaining employees felt like a speed-up. The new management’s acronym lent itself to choice nicknames

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Keith J Pitcher, “Makers Win Some Battles Fighting Productivity Gap,” *Automotive News*, April 3, 1972. Godfrey was not alone in his disregard for the “Blue-Collar Blues,” Lee Iacocca, then President of Ford, told a reporters that “What the hell, I have tough days. It’s boring as hell up here sometimes. Some guys . . . can’t wait to get a white collar on and work in a computer center. And that’s monotonous. That’s really monotonous.” See William Serrin, “. . . And Watching the Fords Go By at Rouge,” *The New York Times*, April 9, 1972..

¹²⁹ The number of workers laid-off after the GMAD takeover was in dispute between the Union and GM. Heather Ann Thompson, states that 800 workers were cut, which is at the high end of figures that the union gave during the strike, see “New Auto Workers, Dissent, and the UAW,” 202. Agis Salpukas stated that 350 jobs were cut in his article “GM’s Vega Plant Closed by Strike,” *New York Times*, March 7, 1972. David Moberg gives a range of 350 to 450 layoffs as a “likely, conservative, estimate” based upon his conversations with union officials, see David Moberg “Rattling the Golden Chains,” 296-297.

¹³⁰ “GM Faces Strike at Ohio Plant,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 3, 1972.

¹³¹ Wright, *On A Clear Day You Can See General Motors*, 169.

invented by frustrated workers, including: “Gee-Mad, Get Mad and Destroy, Get Mean and Destroy, Gotta Make another Dollar, God Made another Dollar” and “Go-Mad.”¹³²

There was little sympathy with GMAD’s efficiency arguments. Carlos Davis, an assembler, told a reporter that “What problems they (GMAD) have they created for themselves. There’s never been a plant to beat GMAD, but this plant is going to try.”¹³³ The confrontation was on.

In December, Local 1112’s leadership began a campaign of “working to rule,” or as the local called it, “working at a normal [pre-GMAD] pace.”¹³⁴ By rigidly following the time specifications for each task, and avoiding the on-the-fly adjustments required to keep pace with the assembly line, workers could protest the speedup without breaching the contract. The minutely detailed rules and specifications that defined every job on the line, ordinarily the bane of an assembler’s existence, became weapons wielded against management power. The fast pace of the Lordstown assembly line aided the worker offensive. Cars that were “passed over” whether consciously by aggrieved workers, or accidentally by their harried counterparts, piled up in the plant’s repair bays and forced multiple line shutdowns.¹³⁵

This type of confrontation blurred the line between deliberately wrecking production and failing to keep up with an undermanned assembly line. Sometimes workers did both. One assembler nicknamed the “Nut” described the mix of actions that took place, “Sabotage (is) just a way of letting off steam. You can’t keep up with the car

¹³² Moberg “Rattling the Golden Chains,” 170. For the “Go-Mad” nickname see Jeffrey Sallaz, *Manufacturing Concessions: Attrition outsourcing at General Motor’s Lordstown USA Assembly Plant*, *Work, Employment, and Society* 18, no 4 (2004): 693.

¹³³ ¹³³ Jon Lowell “Lowdown at Lordstown, GMAD: Jekyll or Hyde,” *Ward’s Auto World*, April 1972.

¹³⁴ Thompson, “New Auto Workers, Dissent, and the UAW,” 203.

¹³⁵ Moberg, “Rattling the Golden Chains,” 171.

so you scratch it on the way past. I once saw a hillbilly drop an ignition key down the gas tank. Last week I watched a guy light a glove and lock it in the trunk. We all waited to see how far down the line they'd discover it . . . If you miss a car, they [GMAD] call that sabotage."¹³⁶ In November, before the confrontation began in earnest, worker's filed 350 grievances. By January, the union stated that there were 500 non-workload grievances, 1000 workload grievances, and 900 disciplinary lay-offs.¹³⁷

This confrontation over quality and assembly line speed occurred in full view of the press. Instead of concealing the defective products, GM attempted to gain the legal high ground for a confrontation with the UAW by alleging that assembly defects resulted from deliberate sabotage. On November 29, 1971, plant management began shutting down the assembly line early and sending workers home. This amounted to a pay cut for hourly employees. The corporation stated the causes of the closings as "slowdown, poor quality, sabotage, plus excessive amounts of repairs."¹³⁸ Because of the alleged circumstance, GM denied the worker's claims for payment of Supplementary Unemployment Benefits (SUB), the fund that provided laid-off workers a portion of their salaries. Plant manager A.B. Anderson revealed to the press a myriad of alleged abuses. Lordstown workers, Anderson charged, had: smashed windshields and rear-view mirrors, slashed upholstery, bent signal levers, and broken ignition keys. He told the *New York Times*, "We've had engine blocks pass 40 men without doing their work."¹³⁹

The UAW countered the "sabotage" allegations with Nader-like counterclaims that focused on GM's role in shipping defective products, hence causing Lordstown

¹³⁶ Barbara Garson, "Luddites in Lordstown," *Harper's Magazine*, June 1972, 70.

¹³⁷ Moberg, "Ratting the Golden Chains," 188, 251

¹³⁸ "Local Committee Case No's 7201 and 7206: Union's Statement," Local 1112 Collection, Box 6, Folder 15, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

¹³⁹ Agis Salpukas, "Young Workers Disrupt Key GM Plant," *New York Times*, January 23, 1972.

assembly's problems and entitling members to SUB payments during the line shutdowns. In a press release, Paul Cubellis replied, "Management claims of sabotage is [sic] a hoax. The don't say that every power tool in the Plant such as power screw drivers, wrenches, drill etc are in very poor condition causing damage to cars and trucks."¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, Cubellis accused GM of having ignored product quality until the UAW began resisting GMAD. "They [management] say the repairs are over taxed and the [repair] lot is full. They have to keep the Repairmen on overtime to get the jobs complete. Well, this repair activity at Lordstown as been going on like this for 5 ½ years."¹⁴¹ The union also reported to the Department of Transportation that GM forced assemblers to use substandard and defective parts. The President of Local 1714 told a press conference that, "Depending on how badly a part is needed, the standards vary. One day the inspectors are told to put 'salvage' tags (indicating a correction is needed) on defective parts. The same day, they will have us OK the same defective part."¹⁴² General Motors and the United Auto Workers *agreed* something was going terribly wrong at Lordstown. The carefully calibrated, contractually constructed terms of the dispute, used by both sides used in their media battle, obscured the disagreement over line speed to the detriment of both parties.¹⁴³

The company-union wrangling did eventually affect Vega sales, pushing them down 50 percent during the March 1972 strike. After the settlement, UAW Vice-President Irving Bluestone told the press, "I told GM brass bluntly to their faces that they

¹⁴⁰ "Press Release by Paul Cubellis – Shop Chairman of Bargaining Committee," Local 1112 Collection, Box 8, Folder 17, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² "Parts Defects Charged at Lordstown Plant," *Automotive News*, March 13, 1972.

¹⁴³ In order to collect SUB payments for its members, Local 1112, argued that "a labor dispute did not exist until the plant was shut down by an authorized strike on March 3, 1972." See "Local Committee Case No's 7201 and 7206: Union's Statement," Local 1112 Collection, Box 6, Folder 15, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

should fire whoever the man was who decided to go to the public with the charge about ‘sloppy production.’”¹⁴⁴ It remains unclear who within the UAW decided to counterattack the corporation with “defective product” charges. Both sides, it seems, understood that the dispute’s mutual recriminations over quality and safety harmed the Vega’s reputation. The bureaucratic impetus towards short-term, well-defined goals, in the form of denying and claiming SUB payments, appears to have overwhelmed the longer-term need by both parties to win consumer acceptance of the new car.

The confrontation unleashed by the work-to-rule action quickly escalated into a strike. Between January 11 and 21, 1972 Local 1112 representatives and plant management engaged in a series of futile negotiations that attempted to resolve the outstanding grievances. To strengthen the hand of these negotiators, the local’s leadership called for a strike vote on January 19. On February 1 and 2, 85 percent of Local 1112 members voted 5572 to 984 to authorize a strike.¹⁴⁵ Bill Brake, President of UAW Local 1005, sent a message of solidarity to Local 1112 on February 2, 1972, declaring “It wouldn’t surprise us that their [GM’s] next move would be to remove the ‘Lord’ from Lordstown and substitute G.M. to call it G.M. Town. After all, if their policies are good for the country - - they may have concluded they are good for the Lord . . .”¹⁴⁶ After the strike vote, negotiations between the company and the union continued beyond the contractually mandated five day waiting period. On Tuesday, February 29, UAW Regional Director Bill Casstevens told members of Local 1714 that nothing had emerged from talks with the company. He then broke what the *Youngstown Vindicator*

¹⁴⁴ Richard Ellers, “UAW Votes to End Strike at Lordstown,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 27, 1972.

¹⁴⁵ Moberg, “Rattling the Golden Chains,” 251-253.

¹⁴⁶ “Letter from Bill Brake and Roy Goforth to Gary Bryner et al,” Local 1112 Collection, Box 8, Folder 1, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

called “three-week verbal truce” and described GMAD as “the worst and most vicious division in GM to deal with.”¹⁴⁷ The company replied in a tone that placed the dispute in its national significance. “A strike not only would be damaging to the community, employees, and the corporation, but also to the national economy in that the Vega (which is built in Lordstown) is an important factor in the competition between domestic-made cars and foreign competition.”¹⁴⁸ By Friday, March 3, Irving Bluestone and his assistant Frank James had arrived in Youngstown for a series of failed “down-to-the wire” negotiations with GM’s George Morris.¹⁴⁹ Given the level of acrimony, and the significance that both sides attributed to the negotiations, it is not surprising that at this point that an agreement did not occur. In the early hours of March 4, the walkout began.

In the rhetorical climate surrounding the strike, an undercurrent of tension emerged between UAW leadership, eager to contain the strike in the framework of the contract, and “outside agitators” that seized on the dispute as an example of a larger struggle within the capitalist system. A radical message arrived in the form of a telegram from the Memphis branch of Young Worker Liberation League (YWLL) on February 8, 1972 proclaiming their support for Local 1112. The YWLL members described GMAD as “Phase 2 Greed-mad bosses” and “Nixon’s shock troops” sent to test “new policies of increased production and profits, while cutting real wages through speedups” in “Nixon’s all-out assault on American Labor.”¹⁵⁰ Another telegram arrived, on March 7, this time from the Boston branch of the YWLL proclaiming its support. “We say right on to the strike of sisters and brothers of UAW Local 1112 against speed-ups at the Vega Plant.

¹⁴⁷ “Lordstown Settlement Appears Dim,” *Youngstown Vindicator*, March 1, 1972.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ “3 GM Officials Join Talks,” *Youngstown Vindicator*, March 3, 1972.

¹⁵⁰ “Telegram to Local 1112 from the Martin Luther King Branch of the Young Workers Liberation League,” February 8, 1972, Box 8, Folder 1, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

Your struggle is crucial to national battle for decent working conditions against monopoly drive for super profits. If we can be of aid, contact us, your struggle is our struggle.”¹⁵¹ Given the temperament of Local 1112 officials, the survival of the YWLL telegrams marked a triumph of bureaucratic punctiliousness over ideological affirmation. In the week before the strike, Tony Zone, Local 1112’s Vice President evicted two reporters from a “Communist newspaper” from the union’s office with a warning that the local would not tolerate handing-out “that garbage” on the picket line.¹⁵² While the UAW leadership, from the International to the local levels, had strong words regarding GM’s management practices, they were careful to keep the dispute within the preexisting contractual and political boundaries.

The eagerness displayed by both Local 1112’s leadership and GM’s plant management to resolve the strike through established channels diminished the level of face-to-face conflict on the picket line. The picketing itself was generally “low key.” After the initial confrontation during the evening of March 4, another “blockade” of the plant took place on March 6, when parked cars belonging to Local 1112 members turned away 300 salaried employees from the plant gates.¹⁵³ It appears that after this incident the local’s leadership deterred further examples of this type of “direct action.” Most of the worker’s strike duty consisted of reporting to the union hall and listening to lectures from the local political action committee.¹⁵⁴ Even the political meetings appeared to have been carefully restrained, discussing questions like how striking workers could apply for

¹⁵¹ “Telegram to Local 1112 from An Industrial of Boston, Young Worker Liberation League,” March 3, 1972, Box 8, Folder 1, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

¹⁵² “2 Locals Set Registration for Benefits,” *Youngstown Vindicator*, March 4, 1972.

¹⁵³ “GM-UAW Talks Break Off; Strike Stops Vega Output,” *Youngstown Vindicator*, March 6, 1972.

¹⁵⁴ David Moberg, “Rattling the Golden Chains,” 311.

food stamps and the importance of registering to vote.¹⁵⁵ A reporter from Cleveland's *Plain Dealer* found the strikers "to a man and a woman" willing to wait out the strike "to protect union rights."¹⁵⁶ While the strikers found *support* from youthful labor radicals, the rational and execution of the action remained grounded in the UAW's standard postwar practices.

After further intervention by negotiators from Detroit, including Irving Bluestone and General Motors' George Morris, the delegations reached a tentative agreement on March 24.¹⁵⁷ On March 26, after a vote of 2500 to 1000, the Lordstown workers ratified an agreement ending the strike. The plant resumed production on March 27.¹⁵⁸ General Motors estimated its monetary losses from the strike at 50,000 unsold Vegas worth \$94 million dollars and 12,000 trucks from the plant's adjacent assembly line, worth \$47 million. Workers lost almost \$11 million in unpaid wages.¹⁵⁹ For the union, the strike settlement yielded mixed results: 130 to 230 of the laid-off workers were rehired and 900 of the 1200 workers given disciplinary layoffs received back pay from the company. Most of the workload grievances were resolved. A "sizeable minority" of workers, however, retained their higher, pre-strike, workloads. In David Moberg's estimation, it was "average or better" settlement when compared with other agreements made by union locals in strikes against GMAD. For many workers, radicalized by the earlier campaign against the corporation, Moberg argues that the settlement appeared as a "sell-out" by

¹⁵⁵ "GM Reports Progress in Negotiations," *Youngstown Vindicator*, March 12, 1972.

¹⁵⁶ Richard Ellers, "Lordstown Militancy Fades, Turns to Stoic Perseverance," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 17, 1972.

¹⁵⁷ Agis Salpukas, "Talks Show Gain in GM Ohio Strike," *New York Times*, March 6, 1972. Jerry Flint "UAW and GM Agree on Ending Vega Plant Strike," *New York Times*, March 25, 1972.

¹⁵⁸ "GM, Union Settle Strike at Vega Assembly Plant," *Washington Post*, March 25, 1972; "Vega Plant Runs Again After Strike," *Washington Post*, March 28, 1972; Thompson, "New Auto Workers, Dissent, and the UAW," 205.

¹⁵⁹ Moberg, "Rattling the Golden Chains," 313.

local union officials that simply returned the situation to the *status quo*.¹⁶⁰ Local 1112 President Gary Bryner summarized the mixture of relief and melancholy that followed the end of the strike, telling the press, “There is never total victory in war.”¹⁶¹ The strike was over, but an atmosphere of conflict and dissent remained on the factory floor.

In an April 3, 1972 interview with *Automotive News*, Joseph Godfrey remained unconvinced that the work-rule changes implemented by GMAD had caused the strike. “You can run an assembly line so fast that a man can’t do his job right. You can also run it so slow that a man can’t do his job right because he has his mind on other things.”¹⁶² Yet there was also a feeling on Godfrey’s part that his quest to eliminate laxness may have foundered on the shoals of worker resistance. “I think a new element has crept into the picture. Not only does management today have to provide the traditional tools to increase productivity such as capital, facilities and equipment, but we have to try to improve the attitudes of workers . . . I’m not a prophet of doom, but I think the productivity problem is worse than it seems.”¹⁶³ General Motors, it appears, was pleased with how Godfrey had handled the Lordstown Strike. He earned a promotion in December 1973 to Vice President-Group Executive for all of GM’s body and assembly operations.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰Ibid, 315. The union leadership appears to believe that the strike’s outcome was better than Moberg claims. In a letter from April 1972, Jack England, Chairman of Local 1112’s SUB Committee stated that “They recalled approximately 272 employees, admitting an overwork situation. They paid and cleared thousands of dollars in discipline, admitting there were no sabotage or “poor quality” on our part, and they settled the existing Paragraph 78 Grievances with added manpower. Now they have an advertising campaign on the Vega that won’t quit attesting to their safety, quality, and superb workmanship needed to build such a sub-compact car.” See “Letter from Jack England to Clodfelter,” UAW 1112 Collection, Box 6, Folder 15, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

¹⁶¹ Richard G Ellers, “Union to Vote on Settlement at Lordstown,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 25, 1972.

¹⁶² Keith J Pitcher, “Makers Win Some Battles Fighting Productivity Gap,” *Automotive News*, April 3, 1972.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ “GM Fills DeLorean’s Spot; Other Changes Revealed,” *Wards Automotive World*, December 1973.

Lessons Not Learned: Lordstown after 1972, the Vega, GM, and the UAW

The strike's settlement did not resolve all of the tension between Local 1112 and GMAD. Conflict continued throughout the summer of 1972 over issues ranging the quality of cafeteria food to the breakdown of protective equipment in the paint department and the welding area of the truck assembly plant.¹⁶⁵ The last grievance triggered a wildcat strike on July 12, 1972, when a group of masked welders walked out and picketed at the plant entrance, causing roughly 1,000 workers in the complex to stay home for the day. GM responded by issuing 185 disciplinary layoffs. Management fired the ten workers it charged with leading the action, although union intervention reinstated nine of the terminated employees.¹⁶⁶ Quality suffered as management imposed heavy overtime to recover from the strike and cut 36 inspectors from each shift in hopes of meeting production quotas. Reducing inspections also removed a potential avenue for workers to control the pace of production. After a brief downturn following the strike, absenteeism became a major problem.¹⁶⁷ The continued discontent ushered in a new round of employee grievances, with over 5,000 filed between March 1972 and September 1973. Joseph Godfrey continued to insist that outside forces, rather than conditions inside the plant, were driving worker dissent. "There is a lot of unrest in the world and

¹⁶⁵ Moberg, "Rattling the Golden Chains," 342-358.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid 51-357; "5 Hooded Pickets Halt Work At GM Plant," *New York Times*, June 12, 1972.

¹⁶⁷ David Moberg, "Rattling the Golden Chains," 324-325, 330.

we feel it on the assembly line -- war, youth rebellion, drugs, race, inflation, and moral degeneration,” he said. “Marriage isn’t what it used to be. We feel it. Their [workers] minds are on other things.”¹⁶⁸ These ongoing labor-management tensions, catalyzed by accelerated Vega production following the October 1973 Arab oil embargo, triggered another strike. In July 1974, Local 1112 members walked out for six and a half weeks.¹⁶⁹ By then the attention of the national media had shifted away from Lordstown. The 1972 strike, did not, by itself, change the pattern of workplace confrontation at the factory. Instead, these conflicts marked waypoints in a slow process of accommodation, by both parties, to a world of economic uncertainty.

It appears that the 1974 strike, combined with the deteriorating national and local economy, improved labor-management cooperation at Lordstown. In 1974, Local President Gary Bryner accepted an appointment from Ohio Governor John Gilligan (D, 1971-75) to serve as the Superintendent of Health and Safety on the State Industrial Commission.¹⁷⁰ His replacement as president, Marlin (Whitey) Ford stated in early 1975, “It changes your outlook quite a bit when you have these mortgage payments, car payments, and kids to feed.”¹⁷¹ Nick Schecodnic, a production worker who struck in 1972, felt that the protracted conflict had finally reached a resolution. “I think that they

¹⁶⁸ Bennett Kremen, “Lordstown-Searching for a Better Way of Work,” *The New York Times*, September 9, 1973.

¹⁶⁹ “GM Strike Ends,” *Washington Post*, August 28 1974,.

¹⁷⁰ “Letter from Gary Bryner to Marlin Ford,” May 14, 1974, Local 1112 Collection, Box 7, Folder 3, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

¹⁷¹ William K Stevens, “Auto Workers at Lordstown, Older and Fearful of Recession, Are No Longer Militant,” *New York Times*, March 19, 1975.

(GM management) realize that if they go in there with the old iron fist that the guys will stick together and if they do, they would cause a lot of trouble.”¹⁷² Hints of earlier militancy remained. In a 1982 interview, Ford railed at GM management: “The Lordstown workers are not martyrs, they understand the way things work at GM. When GM has the power, they kick ass. When we have the power, we kick ass. For good or bad, it [has] filtered down that way through the years. It’s tradition.”¹⁷³ That year, however, the steel mills were largely silent and unemployment in the Youngstown-Warren Area reached 18 percent. Even Ford acknowledged the precarious status of factory workers in a rapidly deindustrializing region. “We know that there are a ton of unemployed steelworkers around here who would be glad to work at General Motors.”¹⁷⁴ As the steel mills along the Mahoning Valley permanently shuttered, a prediction Joseph Godfrey made in 1972 came true: “”They [the workers] complain and yet, if we closed Lordstown down and then reopened, we’d get 50,000 applications [for jobs].”¹⁷⁵ That year, the UAW International approved a concessionary contract with GM, without a strike.¹⁷⁶ Autoworkers, at Lordstown and elsewhere, faced a dramatically reordered world that both offered workplace improvements and narrowed the possibilities for future confrontations.

Lordstown Assembly still builds small cars for the GM system and the assembly process continues to produce grievances. Both the factory and the union now function, however, in profoundly different contexts. The starkest difference is in the number of

¹⁷²Ibid.

¹⁷³ Warren Brown “Growing Mellow in Lordstown: Realities of the ‘80s Dampen Fires of the 70s at GM Plant,” *Washington Post*, March 21, 1982.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid

¹⁷⁵ Quoted in Rothschild, *Paradise Lost*, 133.

¹⁷⁶ In January 1981, Chrysler, in order to secure Federal loan guarantees, negotiated the first concessionary contract with the UAW. Following large losses, GM and Ford renegotiated their contract in 1982 see Rae, *The American Automobile Industry*, 161.

UAW members employed at the plant, a figure that declined from 12,000 in the early 1980s to 2500 in 2003.¹⁷⁷ The competitive threat from imports, abundantly clear by 1980, energized a modest level of employer-employee cooperation through a Quality of Work Life (QWL) Program. Joint management-union committees worked on improving safety, ergonomics, and quality. These efforts had some payoffs: for example, assemblers replaced fixed baskets of parts with adjustable bins that minimized repetitive strain. The continued introduction of new technology, such as automatic painting systems, resulted in layoffs, but spared workers from some of the plant's worst jobs. Arguably, QWL regularized and legitimated the longstanding practice of informal shop floor "workarounds" agreed to by supervisors and workers. In a limited number of "win-win" scenarios, for example where eliminating a safety hazard removed a production bottleneck, QWL worked at Lordstown. This new framework, however, could not deal with other changes in company policy, such as the outsourcing of work and the hiring of non-union "temporary help."¹⁷⁸ The context in which these disputes played themselves in, however, encouraged their settlement without the labor-management rancor of Lordstown in the early 1970s.

Deindustrialization did not end labor-management conflict, but the status of Lordstown Assembly as an island of blue-collar prosperity in the deindustrialized Mahoning Valley certainly diminished the appetite on the part of both veteran workers and the trickle of new hires for conflict with management.¹⁷⁹ In 1972, Lordstown was one of many industrial jobs that a high school graduate, especially a white man from a

¹⁷⁷ Jeffrey Sallaz, "Manufacturing Concessions," 687.

¹⁷⁸ Moser, "Autoworkers at Lordstown," 300-303. The above examples of fewer, but better, jobs on the assembly line are from Jeffrey Sallaz, "Manufacturing Concessions," 698.

¹⁷⁹ Sallaz, "Manufacturing Concessions," 687.

union family, could expect to pursue in the Youngstown-Warren area. For young assemblers beginning their careers in the early 2000s, Lordstown Assembly represented a clear path into owning homes and new cars. These consumer durables, the signifiers of a “middle class” life, were impossible purchases on the retail and restaurant wages that new employees had held while waiting for “the call” from the plant’s human resources department. As one new worker told sociologist Jeffery Sallaz, when asked about the choice between giving concessions for a new model and striking: “Well, those jobs, they’re just something we have to give to keep the plant open. I mean, two or three thousand jobs is better than none!”¹⁸⁰ In the twenty first century’s globalized automotive market, awash in surplus manufacturing capacity, assembly line workers understood that being seen by GM as an “uncooperative” plant risked the capital investments in new products and equipment that kept the production line in business. Corporate behavior that might have been seen as demeaning and intolerable in the early 1970s beat the paltry alternatives that the new millennium offered American workers.

By 1982, the Vega no longer rolled off the line at Lordstown, or anywhere else for that matter. Problems with the Vega’s quality had begun almost immediately after the car’s introduction. In November 1970, the *Washington Post* reported that the height of the Vega’s undercarriage trapped the vehicle in automated car washes.¹⁸¹ The defects worsened from there. On April 8, 1971, GM sent a letter to Vega owners asking them to return their cars for “product improvements” that included fixing “a loose carburetor choke lever, insufficient clearance, a windshield wiper nut which could become loose and

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 704.

¹⁸¹ “Bugs Show Up in the Wash,” *Washington Post*, November 15, 1970.

a fuel tank filler neck subject to gasoline spillages.”¹⁸² By July 1972, there had been three major recalls affecting 500,000 cars, nearly the entire production runs in the 1971 and 1972 model years.¹⁸³ One of these recalls, in May 1972, targeted 350,000 cars with carburetors defects that could “cause the throttle to stick in a partially open position.”¹⁸⁴ *Consumer Reports* consistently placed the vehicle at the bottom of its overall quality rankings for a wide range of problems, going so far as to list the car as “not recommended” in 1975, the only subcompact that received this distinction.¹⁸⁵ The magazine’s editors paid it a dubious compliment in 1977 when they noted that the “Vega’s reputation for engine trouble and body rust have depressed their used-car prices to the point that a very clean specimen may be a good buy -- provided you use the 5-year 60,000 mile warranty as a crutch.”¹⁸⁶ The “little car that does everything well” was a lemon.

These problems, at least initially, did not affect the Vega’s sales. Production reached a record 452,887 units in 1974 as American consumers scrambled for small cars following the 1973 oil embargo. Over the long-term, however, it seems likely that the well publicized “sabotage” allegations made by GM and the accompanying “defective product” claims made by the UAW eroded the brand equity created by GM’s advertising blitz and pre-launch public relations campaign. As DeLorean stated, in retrospect, “That

¹⁸² “GM Conceals Defects: Nader,” *Washington Post*, May 20, 1971.

¹⁸³ “GM Recalls Half Million More Vegas,” *Washington Post*, July 4 1972.

¹⁸⁴ “GM Recalls 350,000 More Vegas,” *Washington Post*, May 9, 1972. GM’s advice for dealing with a stuck throttle was not encouraging. A Chevrolet spokesperson stated, “If such a failure occurs when the car is in motion and the car will not slow down when the driver removes his foot from the accelerator pedal the driver should turn off the ignition key while firmly applying the brakes and bring the vehicle to a stop.” For a summary of the Vega’s many problems see “Detroit Recall is Faster than the Buy,” David C Smith, *Washington Post*, July 10 1972,.

¹⁸⁵ *The 1976 Buying Guide Issue of Consumer Reports* (Mount Vernon, NY: Consumers Union, 1975), 373.

¹⁸⁶ *The 1978 Buying Guide Issue of Consumer Reports*, (Mount Vernon, NY: Consumers Union, 1977), 382-83.

feud [between workers and management] left the unfortunate conclusion in the minds of consumers that both sides felt the Vega was of poor quality.”¹⁸⁷ Perhaps the most telling indication that GM managers perceived the Vega’s image as tarnished beyond repair was the 1976 model year introduction of the Chevette as GM’s new subcompact. In 1977, Vega production ended.¹⁸⁸ Some of the problems, such as the cars’ engine failures, were engineering defects “built-into” the vehicle’s design by overambitious engineers. The perception of the Vega as suffering from poor “fit and finish,” however were likely the results of a production system that alienated workers and a manufacturing process that stressed production over quality.¹⁸⁹ Volkswagen still sells Beetles, Toyota still sells Corollas, but no one has campaigned to “bring back” a revamped Vega.

The worker rebellion at Lordstown and the failure by the Chevrolet Vega to halt the penetration of imports into the American market revealed serious flaws in General Motors’ production and engineering system. Despite all the fiscal, technological, and managerial power that GM had applied, it failed in its attempt to adapt the firm’s design, production, and labor relations’ strategies to meet increased competition and regulation. The warning sounded at Lordstown for GM’s future went unheeded, however. Rather than reassessing what had gone wrong with the Vega and Lordstown Assembly, General Motors *accelerated* its quest for a panacea that would restore the company’s declining competitive advantage. This strategy, playing to GM’s strengths in engineering *artifacts* neglected the reform of outmoded management *practices* on both production lines and in

¹⁸⁷ Wright, *On A Clear Day You Can See General Motors*, 170.

¹⁸⁸ “Fighting the Foreign Wars,” *Edmunds Inside Line*, <http://www.edmunds.com/insideline/do/Features/articleId=109161>. Accessed May 11, 2008.

¹⁸⁹ “The most serious problems of the Vega, several of which led to recalls and some such as overheating of the engine—that eventually sapped the market for the car, or defects of engineering, not workmanship. Nevertheless, after the publicity of defective cars and sabotage, sales slipped and the Vega always carried a taint as an unreliable car.” David Moberg “No More Junk: Lordstown Workers and the Demand for Quality,” *Insurgent Sociologist* 8, no. 2/3 (Fall 1978): 64..

the executive offices. The results were a collection of new dysfunctional factories, such as GM's notorious complex in Detroit's Poletown. Manufacturing turmoil compounded unimaginative small cars and quality glitches that devalued the corporation's brand equity and eroded customer loyalty. Badly made, poorly designed vehicles that all "looked alike" led to reduced market share, lower profits, and layoffs.¹⁹⁰ Compared to the billions invested in production technology, GM made only limited attempts to improve cooperation between workers and management in the 1980s: the New Union Motor joint-venture with Toyota and the "team concept" attempt at GM's assembly plant in Van Nuys, California.¹⁹¹

It was only in the Saturn program, GM's first new division since Chevrolet, that the firm attempted integration of product design, improved manufacturing technology and a new labor agreement between the UAW and GM. Even Saturn's comprehensive approach to upgrading the production process, did not diffuse into the rest of the organization. Industry journalist Keith Bradsher reported in the *New York Times* in 1998 that "GM factories are generally the least efficient in the industry, partly because labor and management so deeply distrust each other . . . In private, the two sides seldom have anything good to say about each other."¹⁹² It is impossible to draw a neat path between the Lordstown Strike in 1972 and General Motors' declaration in the fall of 2008 that the company was "effectively bankrupt." Too many failed products, bungled acquisitions (such as the 1984 purchase of Electronic Data Systems), missed opportunities (including

¹⁹⁰The best study on the crisis faced by GM in the 1980s remains Maryann Keller *Rude Awakening: The Rise, Fall, and Struggle for Recovery of General Motors* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1989). Imports were not the only competitive threat that GM faced in the 1980s, Ford, lacking the capital for large-scale capital expenditures, focused instead on improving quality and product development and ultimately outpaced GM in earnings, see Douglas Brinkley *Wheels for the World: Henry Ford, His Company, and a Century of Progress 1903-2003* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 685-703.

¹⁹¹ Maryann Keller, *Rude Awakening*, 25-44.

¹⁹²Quoted in Rubenstein, *Making and Selling Cars*, 156.

Saturn), and macroeconomic changes occurred in the intervening twenty-six years to argue for a direct connection between what happened at Lordstown and GM's present-day disarray.¹⁹³ Clearly, however, the Lordstown and the Vega were two important warnings in the parabolic history of a major industrial enterprise.

The strike also revealed the limits in the UAW's traditional response to GMAD's encroachment on the shop floor order. The grievance process, work to rule, public relations offensive, and strike action exacted a price on GM's profits and reputation. The Lordstown assemblers and their International leadership lacked negotiating tools that could resolve the tension on the shop floor between productivity, quality, and a tolerable work environment. As Ken Bannon warned Ford after Lordstown, "The pace at which people are compelled to work and the monotony of many jobs have their effect both on the worker and the product."¹⁹⁴ Lordstown could have been a starting point for a new labor arrangement with GM that combined improved quality and reduced absenteeism with better working conditions and greater worker control. The structure of the UAW-GM relationship, driven by the rules set in contract negotiations, precluded rapid adaptations to changing conditions on the shop floor. The QWL framework that did emerge improved, but did not eliminate, the difficulties faced by the union in managing factory conditions for the benefit of its members.

¹⁹³ Bill Vlasic, "GM Lays Its Future on Washington's Doorstep," *New York Times*, February 26, 2009.

¹⁹⁴ Ed Townsend, "Unrest on GM's Fast Assembly Line," *Chicago Tribune*, April 12, 1972.

As Heather Thompson notes, the UAW's new leadership proved that it could still "fight back" against GM's impositions.¹⁹⁵ Indeed UAW membership actually peaked at 1.5 million in 1979 before undergoing a precipitous decline: 1.3 million members in 1983, 1 million in 1986, 800, 000 in 2008.¹⁹⁶ Yet, the ability of the UAW to resist GM power on the shop floor mattered less in the new economic climate. The continued globalization of the automotive industry resulted in accelerated import competition and lead to domestic overcapacity. A saturated marketplace made UAW locals vulnerable to management coercion. After the recessions of the early 1980s, in the words of historian Steve Babson "any plant that lost its current model was at considerable risk of a permanent shutdown, and in this crisis atmosphere, management made it clear that "cooperative" locals stood the better chance of wining new work."¹⁹⁷ The unanswered question was whether the UAW knew what it was fighting *for* in an era of change in the auto industry

¹⁹⁵“Mainly, however, this strike was significant because it showed that management was indeed launching a new assault on labor during this period, and that there were specific circumstances under which the UAW leadership would fight back.” Thompson, “New Auto Workers, Dissent and the UAW,” 205.

¹⁹⁶ For UAW job losses Rubenstein, *Making and Selling Cars*,155.

¹⁹⁷Steve Babson, “Restructuring the Workplace: Post-Fordism or Return of the Foreman?,” *Autowork*, ed. Robert Asher and Ronald Edsforth (Albany: State University of New York Press: 1995), 246.

Conclusion: The Tragedy of the American Automobile Industry

At Lordstown, General Motors and the UAW struggled and fought over how to adapt their organizations in the face of political and economic change. It is impossible, of course, to reduce industrial America to one factory, city, company, or union. But the 1972 strike at Lordstown Assembly, and the larger narrative of technological and bureaucratic conflict that it embodies, does offer useful insights into the present condition of America politics, business, and labor. Lordstown offers a lookout post, not only on the interconnected stories of decline within GM and the UAW, but also on a larger theme of late 20th century history: the erosion of the New Deal state. Several cornerstones of American life at mid-century -- Keynesian economics, the multi-divisional corporation, and the industrial union -- arose in the 1920s and 1930s to harness the power of mass production and consumption. By the late sixties and early seventies, however, these structures became shackles in a new competitive landscape. At a basic level, Lordstown is the story of how the struggle for short-term advantage within the bureaucratic structures of industrial unionism, managerial capitalism, and the New Deal state imposed significant long-term costs on all participants.

For General Motors, the Vega and the strike revealed several key organizational flaws. In the design process, the top management's decision to bypass the divisional structure, while simultaneously introducing untested technology, deprived the product development system of its built-in "checks and balances." The result: a vehicle with

serious, wholly unnecessary, “built-in” defects. Second, the decision made to divorce production (via GMAD) from divisional sales and marketing functions led to short-term savings through higher output and reducing the proliferation of parts and the duplication of functions. In the longer run, however, this strategy of rationalization imposed significant costs. Since GMAD did not have to sell the cars it built, or cater to the needs to dealers, the organization had every incentive to forsake quality and an amiable relationship with the UAW in exchange for higher production. The willingness on the part of GMAD to endanger Chevrolet’s brand equity and GM’s investment in the Vega in the confrontation over Lordstown’s line-speed, not to mention the organization’s long list of confrontations at other plants, is ample proof of this problem. In exchange for temporary advantage over the UAW, by not making the SUB payments during the “work to rule” part of the conflict, GMAD drove the situation in late 1971 towards a strike, and did long-term significant damage to the reputation of the Vega. All of the lavish publicity and advertising, not to mention the capital investment in sophisticated equipment, ultimately produced a product that could not deliver on the firm’s promise to consumers. The other ongoing problems discussed in this paper for GM post-1972 -- poor product quality, look alike cars, wasted investments in automation -- show a similar pattern of looking at the next quarter rather than the next decade. In so doing, the corporation slowly squandered its resources in a quest for “the next big thing.” General Motors organization worked, but the incentives and attitudes that had permeated the firm’s culture, targeted the wrong objectives for enduring success. In an environment of growing competition from sophisticated rivals, GM paid dearly for this hubris.

For the UAW, Lordstown sent an unheeded warning about the limits of Reuther's strategy for the relationship between the union and GM. In the short term, of course, the leadership of Local 1112, with the support of the International, did what their members expected them to do: fight the speed-up and resist the impositions of GMAD. The young workers at Lordstown, beneath their sometimes libertarian (and libertine) attitudes, stuck together much as their parent's had, and fought the largest corporation in America to a draw. Given the long record of worker defeats at the hands of corporate power in the history of the Mahoning Valley, the Lordstown assemblers deserve more credit than the contemporary record gave them. Lordstown, however, also reveals the weakness that stemmed from Reuther's willingness to sacrifice "managerial prerogatives" in exchange for wages and benefits. Such a trade, of course, might not have ever been in the offering. The UAW could, and did, halt the shop floor offensive, although the union, like the company, risked the quality of the product in order to threaten GMAD. Doing so, of course, threatened member's long-term jobs. The union recognized the threat that imported cars from lower-wage (and higher productivity) countries, but there was nothing in its contract to compel (or even bargain) with GM over the firm's strategy and the future jobs of union members. The UAW could say "no," and make it stick, in the short term. In the longer run, without a say over corporate strategy, the Big Three could, and did, bypass and marginalize the union in formulating their corporate strategy.

Looking at the conflict between these two important organizations reveals larger issues with the historiography of the New Deal's "fall" in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Historians have documented the enormous stress created on the institutions of the 1930s as they tried to achieve (or fought and resisted) racial integration, gender equality, and a

reduction in the harms (such as pollution) created by the excesses of capitalism and uncontrolled government power. Another less traveled path of argument focuses on how these older organizations, such as the GM and the UAW, buckled under problems, such as industry competition and workers rights, that they had originally been designed to solve. By the early 1970s, however, the company and the union, not to mention the federal government, all showed clear signs of “institutional brittleness,” that extended beyond questions of race and rights. The power of management and labor bureaucracy to undertake the mass mobilization of productive resources and worker power destroyed old barriers. This process also created new limits of action and self-defeating bureaucratic incentives. A look at the rise of the New Right in the 1970s must thus look beyond how political leaders fomented and shaped dissatisfaction with the political-economic status quo. It must also look to stories of institutional change, destruction, and creation in response to the limits of the old order.

The historian can, of course, speculate over the “what might have been,” and “the road(s) not taken” in the history of the workers and companies that built the American automobile. Did GM and the UAW miss an opportunity at Lordstown? The answer is yes. The confrontation, however, is part of a much longer and more complicated process, rather than in off-ramp to a road not taken. It is the story of sophisticated people, with good intentions, trapped in the self-destructive system of the power and production that they had inherited. For all of the smugness displayed by GM, and to an extent by the UAW leadership and shop floor workers, the failings of this system was plain by the spring of 1972. The only surprise for the industry, I would argue, was the swiftness of the descent from sheet metal to scrap heap

Epilogue: Leaving Detroit

At the end of my three days in Detroit, pouring through the yellowing records of Local 1112, I waited outside the city's train station. Like so much else in this staggering city, the Michigan Central Station where so many migrants came in search of their dreams, stands abandoned. Its anonymous replacement, where I stood on Friday, December 19, 2008, overlooks the old General Motors building.

Snow fell in sheets.

Inside the station, the television broke to a press conference. General Motors' then-CEO Rick Wagoner announced that the firm had secured \$13.4 billion in emergency Federal aid.¹⁹⁸ The company laid down for the count, a punch line and a punching bag, and begged for forbearance from the world that it did so much to create.

After Mr. Wagoner put a brave face placed on corporate collapse, the station switched to back regular programming.

As the train pulled out into the blizzard, gathering speed, I passed the tableau of the American Century: the immigrant churches, the rail yards, River Rouge, Greenfield Village, and the miles of rubble and abandonment, all silhouetted against the winter skies.

Decline is not an aesthetic.

The ruined landscape stretched before me as a quiet indictment, the muted cries of a million dreams deferred.

¹⁹⁸ See David Sanger, David Herszenhorn, and Bill Vlasic, "Bush Aids Detroit, but Hard Choice Wait for Obama," *New York Times*, December 20, 2008.

In my mind's eye, the older world of industrial empires, the unionized armies waging the "battle of production," and the city infused with smoke-stained life, flowed past. Outside, the American automobile industry, faded into memory.

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