

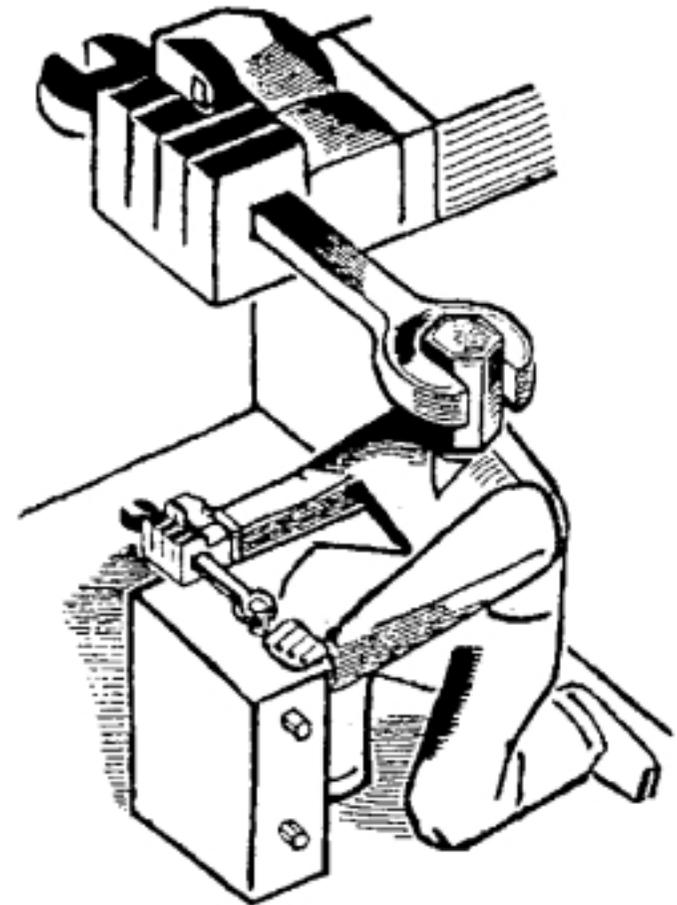
Counter-Planning on the Shop floor

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Books

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Bill Watson

NOTES

1. In this plant more than half the workers were either black or newly arrived Southern whites; that percentage may be as high as 75%. The remainder were mixed; whites of Northern origin, many Italians and Mexicans, and a small Hungarian and Polish segment. The women constituted from 5% to 10% of the work force and were generally black or Southern white. In the actions and organisations of workers that this paper describes, the most operative relationships were between blacks and Southern whites. Despite the prevalence of racist attitudes, which were a regular substance of interaction and even a source of open talk and joking, these two groups functioned together better than any other groups in the plant. Also in the events described women were no less active than men were. Finally, there was a definite relationship between age and action. Younger workers were more willing to fight back and risk their positions than older workers. The workers from 18 to 35 were the most militantly antiunion and the most willing to go beyond the established channels in their work actions.

2. The overt expressions of the men themselves about their activity are closely tied to the actual work experience. There is little if any notion that the daily struggle in the plant has anything to do with the state or the society as a whole. Rather it is seen as a struggle waged against an immobile bureaucracy in the company and against the labour establishment so as to improve working conditions; A kind of populist mentality is crucial here, particularly with the Southern whites who showed an immediate dislike for all organisational authority and believe (like a religion) that the only way to get anything done well is to do it themselves. While workers clearly design activity to control the length of the working day, for example, these same men are unaware that the relationships and organisation involved could also function to plan and control their own production. Yet it is not so important that workers so often miss the social significance of their activities; the vital point is not their consciousness, but what they actually do. Their activity smashes into the contradictions of productive relations and motivates the evolution of counter-structures in the plant.

Counter-Planning on the Shop floor

Bill Watson

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It is difficult to judge just when working-class practice at the point of production learned to bypass the union structure in dealing with its problems, and to substitute (in bits and pieces) a new organisational form. It was clear to me, with my year's stay in an auto motor plant (Detroit area, 1968) that the process had been long underway. What I find crucial to understand is that while sabotage and other forms of independent workers' activity had existed before (certainly in the late nineteenth century and with the Wobbly period), that which exists today is unique in that it follows mass unionism and is a definite response to the obsolescence of that social form. The building of a new form of organisation today by workers is the outcome of attempts, here and there, to seize control of various aspects of production. These forms are beyond unionism; they are only secondarily concerned with the process of negotiation, while unionism made that its central point. Just as the CIO was created as a form of struggle by workers, so, out of necessity, that form is being bypassed and destroyed now, and a new organisational form is being developed in its place. The following, then, is by implication a discussion of the self-differentiation of workers from the form of their own former making. The activities and the new relationships which I record here are glimpses of a new social form we are yet to see full-blown, perhaps American workers' councils.(1)

Planning and counter-planning are terms that flow from actual examples. The most flagrant case in my experience involved the sabotaging of a six-cylinder model. The model, intended as a large, fast "6", was hastily planned by the company, without any interest in the life or the precision of the motor. It ran rough with a very sloppy cam. The motor became an issue first with complaints emanating from the motor-test area along with dozens of suggestions for improving the motor and modifying its design (all ignored). From this level, activities eventually arose to counter-plan the production of the motor.

The interest in the motor had grown plant-wide. The general opinion among workers was that certain strategic modifications could be made in the assembly and that workers had suggestions that could well be utilised. This interest was flouted, and the contradictions of planning and producing poor quality, beginning as the stuff of jokes, eventually became a source of anger. In several localities of the plant organised acts of sabotage began. They began as acts of mis-assembling or even omitting parts on a larger-than-normal scale so that many motors would not pass inspection. Organisation involved various deals between inspection and several

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assembly areas with mixed feelings and motives, among those involved - some determined, some revengeful, some just participating for the fun of it. With an air of excitement, the thing pushed on.

Temporary deals unfolded between inspection and assembly and between assembly and trim, each with planned sabotage. Such things were done as neglecting to weld unmachined spots on motor heads; leaving out gaskets to create a loss of compression; putting in bad or wrong-size spark plugs; leaving bolts loose in the motor assembly; or, for example, assembling the plug wires in the wrong firing order so that the motor appeared to be off balance during inspection. Rejected motors accumulated.

In inspection, the systematic cracking of oil-filter pins, rocker-arm covers, or distributor caps with a blow from a timing wrench allowed the rejection of motors in cases in which no defect had been built in earlier along the line. In some cases, motors were simply rejected for their rough running.

There was a general atmosphere of hassling and arguing for several weeks as foremen and workers haggled over particular motors. The situation was tense, with no admission of sabotage by workers and a cautious fear of escalating it among management personnel. Varying in degrees of intensity, these conflicts continued for several months. In the weeks just preceding a change-over period, a struggle against the V-8s (which will be discussed later) combined with the campaign against the "6s" to create a shortage of motors. At the same time management's headaches were increased by the absolute ultimate in auto-plant disasters - the discovery of a barrage of motors that had to be painstakingly removed from their bodies so that defects that had slipped through could be repaired.

Workers returning from a six-week change-over layoff discovered an interesting outcome of the previous conflict. The entire six-cylinder assembly and inspection operation had been moved away from the V-8s - undoubtedly at great cost to an area at the other end of the plant where new workers were brought in to man it. In the most dramatic way, the necessity of taking the product out of the hands of labourers who insisted on planning the product became overwhelming. There was hardly a doubt in the minds of the men in a plant teeming with discussion about the move for days that the act had countered their activities. A parallel situation arose in the weeks just preceding that year's changeover, when the company attempted to build the last V-8s using parts which had been rejected during the year. The hope of management was that the foundry could close early and that there would be minimal waste. The fact, however, was that the motors were running extremely rough; the crankshafts were particularly shoddy; and the pistons had been formerly rejected, mostly because of omitted oil holes or rough surfaces.

The first protest came from the motor-test area, where the motors were being rejected. It was quickly checked, however, by management, which sent down personnel to hound the inspectors and to insist on the acceptance of the motors. It was after this that a series of contacts, initiated by motor-test men, took place between areas during breaks and lunch periods. Planning at these innumerable meetings ultimately led to plant-wide sabotage of the V-8s. As with the six-cylinder motor sabo-

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mented to the authority of the bureaucracy was evidently quite great. Management took a stand, and, with only a limited number of men involved in a non-production activity, retained its power to plan that particular event. For six weeks, then, the "rational" plan of work was executed - which meant that the labour force was watched over and directed in an orderly fashion by foremen and various other agents of social control. The work which men want to do together takes four days - at most a six-day week; the work which is forced on them, in the same amount, is monotonously dragged out for six weeks, with all the rational breaks and lunch periods which are deemed necessary for the labourers.

We end, then, more or less on the note on which we began: stressing a new social form of working-class struggle. The few examples here have been a mere glimpse of that form and hardly entitle us to fully comprehend it. But we can see that as a form it is applied to the actual working day itself and to the issues of planning and control which, in my view, make it distinctly post-unionism as a practice. The use of sabotage as a method of struggling for control will increase as this form of struggle develops further, but this is merely the apparatus of movement. A crucial point to focus on is the differentiation of this new form of struggle from its former organisation: mass unionism.

Within these new' independent forms of workers' organisation lies a foundation of social relations at the point of production that can potentially come forward to seize power in a crisis situation and give new direction to the society. I would urge, in closing, that our attention and work be focused on the investigating and reporting of the gradual emergence of this new mode of production out of the old. "Like a thief in the night" it advances relatively unnoticed.

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nately working long stretches and taking off long stretches. Jobs are illegally traded off and men relieve each other for long periods to accomplish this. The smuggling of men through different areas of the plant to work with friends is yet another regular activity requiring no small amount of organisation.

The substitution of alternative systems of executing work has its counterpart in areas of the plant which have become, strictly speaking, off limits to non-workers; they are havens of the plant where men are not subject to external regulation. Usually they are bathrooms, most of which are built next to the ceiling with openings onto the roof. Chaise lounges, lawn chairs, cots, and the like have been smuggled into most of them. Sweepers, who move around the plant, frequently keep tabs on what is called "john time"; the men line up an hour here or there when they can take a turn in the fresh air of the roof or space out on a cot in one of the ripped-out stalls. The "off-limits" character of these areas is solid, as was demonstrated when a foreman, looking for a worker who had illegally arranged to leave his job, went into one of the workers' bathrooms. Reportedly he walked up the stairs into the room, and within seconds was knocked out the door, down the stairs, and onto his back on the floor. That particular incident involved two foremen and several workers and ended with the hospitalisation of two participants with broken ribs and bruises.

The coexistence of two distinct sets of relations, two modes of work, and two power structures in the plant is evident to the worker who becomes part of any of the main plant areas. But that coexistence is the object of constant turmoil and strife; it is hardly an equilibrium when considered over time. It is a struggle of losing and gaining ground. The attempt to assert an alternative plan of action on the part of workers is a constant threat to management.

During the model changeover mentioned above, the management had scheduled an inventory that was to last six weeks. They held at work more than 50 men who otherwise would have been laid off with 90% of their pay. The immediate reaction to this was the self-organisation of workers, who attempted to take the upper hand and finish the inventory in three or four days so they could have the remaining time off. Several men were trained in the elementary use of the counting scales while the hi-lo truck drivers set up an informal school to teach other men to use their vehicles. Others worked directly with experienced stock chasers and were soon running down part numbers and taking inventory of the counted stock. In several other ways the established plan of ranking and job classification was circumvented in order to slice through the required working time.

The response to this was peculiarly harsh. Management forced it to a halt, claiming that the legitimate channels of authority, training, and communication had been violated. Being certified as a truck driver, for example, required that a worker had a certain amount of seniority and completes a company-training program. There was a great deal of heated exchange and conflict, but to no avail. Management was really determined to stop the workers from organising their own work, even when it meant that the work would be finished quicker and, with the men quickly laid off, less would be advanced in wages.

The threat which this unleashing of energy in an alternative plan of action pre-

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tage, the V-8s were defectively assembled or damaged en route so that they would be rejected. In addition to that, the inspectors agreed to reject something like three out of every four or five motors.

The result was stacks upon stacks of motors awaiting repair, piled up and down the aisles of the plant. This continued at an accelerating pace up to a night when the plant was forced to shut down, losing more than 10 hours of production time. At that point there were so many defective motors piled around the plant that it was almost impossible to move from one area to another.

The work force was sent home in this unusually climactic shutdown, while the inspectors were summoned to the head supervisor's office, where a long interrogation began. Without any confession of foul play from the men, the supervisor was forced into a tortuous display which obviously troubled even his senses, trying to tell the men they should not reject motors which were clearly of poor quality without actually being able to say that. With tongue in cheek, the inspectors thwarted his attempts by asserting again and again that their interests were as one with the company in getting out the best possible product. In both the case of the "6s" and the V-8s, there was an organised struggle for control over the planning of the product of labour; its manifestation through sabotage was only secondarily important. A distinct feature of this struggle is that its focus is not on negotiating a higher price at which wage labour is to be bought, but rather on making the working day more palatable. The use of sabotage in the instances cited above is a means of reaching out for control over one's own work. In the following we can see it extended as a means of controlling one's working "time."

The shutdown is radically different from the strike; its focus is on the actual working day. It is not, as popularly thought, a rare conflict. It is a regular occurrence, and, depending on the time of year, even an hourly occurrence. The time lost from these shutdowns poses a real threat to capital through both increased costs and loss of output. Most of these shutdowns are the result of planned sabotage by workers in certain areas, and often of plant-wide organisation.

The shutdown is nothing more than a device for controlling the rationalisation of time by curtailing overtime planned by management. It is a regular device in the hot summer months. Sabotage is also exerted to shut down the process to gain extra time before lunch and, in some areas, to lengthen group breaks or allow friends to break at the same time. In the especially hot months of June and July, when the temperature rises to 115 degrees in the plant and remains there for hours, such sabotage is used to gain free time to sit with friends in front of a fan or simply away from the machinery.

A plant-wide rotating sabotage program was planned in the summer to gain free time. At one meeting workers counted off numbers from ~ to 50 or more. Reportedly similar meetings took place in other area. Each man took a period of about 20 minutes during the next two weeks, and when his period arrived he did something to sabotage the production process in his area, hopefully shutting down the entire line. No sooner would the management wheel in a crew to repair or correct the problem area than it would go off in another key area. Thus the entire plant usually sat out

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anywhere from 5 to 20 minutes of each hour for a number of weeks due to either a stopped line or a line passing by with no units on it. The techniques for this sabotage are many and varied, going well beyond my understanding in most areas.

The "sabotage of the rationalisation of time" is not some foolery of men. In its own context it appears as nothing more than the forcing of more free time into existence; any worker would tell you as much. Yet as an activity that counteracts capital's prerogative of ordering labour's time, it is a profound organised effort by labour to undermine its own existence as "abstract labour power". The seizing of quantities of time for getting together with friends and the amusement of activities ranging from card games to reading or walking around the plant to see what other areas are doing is an important achievement for labourers. Not only does it demonstrate the feeling that much of the time should be organised by the workers themselves, but it also demonstrates an existing animosity toward the practice of constantly postponing all of one's desires and inclinations so the rational process of production can go on uninterrupted. The frequency of planned shutdowns in production increases as more opposition exists toward such rationalisation of the workers' time.

What stands out in all this is the level of co-operative organisation of workers in and between areas. While this organisation is a reaction to the need for common action in getting the work done, relationships like these also function to carry out sabotage, to make collections, or even to organise games and contests that serve to turn the working day into an enjoyable event. Such was the case in the motor-test area.

The inspectors organised a rod-blowing contest that required the posting of look-outs at the entrances to the shop area and the making of deals with assembly, for example, to neglect the torquing of bolts on rods for a random number of motors so that there would be loose rods. When an inspector stepped up to a motor and felt the telltale knock in the water-pump wheel, he would scream out to clear the shop, the men abandoning their work and running behind boxes and benches. Then he would arc himself away from the stand and ram the throttle up to first 4,000 and then 5,000 rpm. The motor would knock, clank, and finally blur to a cracking halt with the rod blowing through the side of the oil pan and across the shop. The men would rise up from their cover, exploding with cheers, and another point would be chalked on the wall for that inspector. This particular contest went on for several weeks, resulting in more than 150 blown motors. No small amount of money was exchanged in bets over the contests.

In another case, what began as a couple of men's squirting each other on a hot day with the hoses on the test stands developed into a standing hose fight in the shop area which lasted several days. Most of the motors were either neglected or simply okayed so that the men were free for the fight, and in many cases they would destroy or dent a unit so that it could be quickly written up. The fight usually involved about 10 or 15 unused hoses, each with the water pressure of a fire hose. With streams of crossfire, shouting, laughing, and running about, there was hardly a man in the mood for doing his job. The shop area was regularly drenched from ceiling to floor, with every man completely soaked. Squirt guns, nozzles, and buckets were

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soon brought in, and the game took on the proportions of a brawl for hours on end. One man walked around with his wife's shower cap on for a few days to the amusement of the rest of the factory, which wasn't aware of what was happening in the test area.

The turning of the working day into an enjoyable activity becomes more of a necessary event as the loneliness and hardship of constant and rapid production becomes more oppressive. Part of the reality of concrete labour is that it is less and less able to see itself as merely an abstract means to some end, and more and more inclined to see its working day as a time in which the interaction of men should be an interesting and enjoyable thing. In this way the campaign against the six-cylinder motors does not differ from the rod-blowing contest or the hose fight: each is the expression of men who see their work as a practical concrete process and their relations as men as simple and spontaneous, to be structured as they see fit. Whether they should work together at full steam or with intermittent periods of diversity or even cease working altogether - comes to be more and more a matter for their own decision. The evolution of these attitudes is, needless to say, a constant target for bureaucratic counter-insurgency.(2)

This constant conflict with the bureaucratic rationalisation of time is expressed dramatically each day at quitting time. Most workers not on the main assembly line finish work, wash, and are ready to go a full four minutes ahead of the quitting siren. But with 30 or 40 white-shirt foremen on one side of the main aisle and 300 or 400 men on the other side, the men begin, en masse, to imitate the sound of the siren with their mouths, moving and then literally running over the foremen, stampeding for the punch clocks, punching out, and racing out of the plant as the actual siren finally blends into their voices. With a feeling of release after hours of monotonous work, gangs of workers move out from the side aisles into the main aisles, pushing along, shouting, laughing, knocking each other around - heading for the fresh air on the outside. The women sometimes put their arms around the guards at the gates, flirting with them and drawing their attention away from the men who scurry from the plant with distributors, spark plugs, carburettors, even a head here and there under their coats - bursting with laughter as they move out into the cool night. Especially in the summers, the nights come alive at quitting time with the energy of release: the squealing of tires out of the parking lot, racing each other and dragging up and down the streets. Beer in coolers stored in trunks is not uncommon and leads to spontaneous parties, wrestling, brawling, and laughter that spills over into the parks and streets round the factory. There is that simple joy of hearing your voice loudly and clearly for the first time in 10 or 12 hours.

There is planning and counter-planning in the plant because there is clearly a situation of dual power. A regular phenomenon in the daily reality of the plant is the substitution of entirely different plans for carrying out particular jobs in place of the rational plans organised by management.

On the very casual level, these substitutions involve, for example, a complete alternative break system of workers whereby they create large chunks of free time for each other on a regular basis. This plan involves a voluntary rotation of alter-