

**Lean Production and the Discourse of Dissent:
Radicalizing the Shopfloor at Mitsubishi Motors?**

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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 1989, Chrysler and Mitsubishi Motors entered a joint venture to build automobiles in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois. Production and maintenance workers at the joint venture Diamond Star plant approached their jobs with great anticipation. Now ten years after “lean production” and “employee teams” were introduced, this paper revisits the initial expectations of workers and through an employee survey assesses how employee attitudes, shop floor behavior and language have coalesced to create an oppositional discourse of dissent. At Mitsubishi there appears to be a fundamental contradiction between the discourse of production as spoken and the experiences of the workers working within that discourse. The tension between language and practice demands understanding and recognition; consequently, to meet those needs the workers have created their own way of talking about work life at Mitsubishi.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the last quarter of the 20th Century the auto industry was enthusiastically encouraged to become “flexible,” “empowering” and “lean” (Wolmack and Roos 1990). Unlike the Fordist days of command and control, corporate management auto executives were pushed to adopt a production rational where workers, managers and stockholders were considered equal stakeholders in the labor process. Work systems were to be redesigned and the technical and social aspects of the firm changed to reflect a greater need for product development, quality, cost reductions and employee involvement. The stated goal of lean advocates was to create a work environment where employees feel “vital, energetic, excited and committed [because they] feel that the organization is doing what [they] believe is important” (Jaffe et. al. 1994: 84). Empowerment theorists such as Lawler (1986, 1992) and Jaffe et al (1994) also suggested that by getting employees more involved in decision making they would become more satisfied with their work lives.

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Management's declared hope was that if employee involvement schemes were implemented, loyalty, dedication and commitment would be restored, along with increased productivity.

Other observers of this new form of work organization were not so optimistic. They viewed lean systems and its promises of empowerment as an attempt to co-opt workers (Babson 1993, 1995, 1998; Parker and Slaughter 1995; Lewchuk 1997; Potterfield 1999). In this later view, a new discourse was needed to create a more committed workforce during increasingly competitive economic times. Lean organizations promised that the worker would be empowered through work flexibility, skill development and reengineered thinking in return for working harder, faster, and smarter. But according to the critics this exchange produced a new form of managerial control over the labor process. Rather than brute force and tight surveillance, a new *discourse of lean production* would serve as a way to get workers to internalize management's goals of "reducing costs, increasing productivity and maximizing flexibility in the deployment of human resources" (Potterfield 1999: 118). This discourse included a seductive language of "partnership," "teamwork," "empowerment," and "joint decision making." Work was not only reorganized but workers were reoriented to the labor process.

Opponents of employee involvement schemes perceived that the structure used to co-opt workers into adopting lean production values was intended to legitimate the nature of work in the contemporary workplace. They noted that by discussing lean production as if it were a market driven necessity, management's discourse helped to depoliticize the nature of workplace change embodied in the work process. Potterfield has described this

ideological manipulation as a form of “legitimation, reification and dissimulation” (1999: 118-131). The great irony, however, is that rather than increasing employee satisfaction or legitimizing the new productive process, the discourse of “empowerment” has actually drawn attention to the schism that exists between management and worker.

Discourse is a term that has defied easy explanation. For the purpose of critiquing workplace ideologies discourse is defined here as “ways of thinking, listening, reading, writing, acting, interacting, believing, valuing, and using tools and objects in particular settings and at particular times, so as to display or recognize a particular social identity” (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996: 10). Critical to any definition is the understanding that cognition, language and practice only become meaningful within a structure that “makes sense to a community of people” (Jennings forthcoming). However, the structure by which a subject assumes a recognizable identity is not built upon a fixed foundation. In other words, “meaning is always negotiated” between interested parties and competing multiple discourses (Torfing 1999: 85).

The dominant discourse is the primary way in which those in power foster and impose a coherent reality upon a subordinate group. A measure of the discourse’s power is its’ ability to get the oppressed to internalize the worldview and to speak the language of the oppressor. The discourse is successful to the extent in which it seems right, true, and obvious. Foucault has described power as follows:

[T]he characteristic feature of power is that some men can more or less entirely determine other men’s conduct – but never exhaustively or fully. A man who is chained up and beaten is subject to force being exerted over him. Not power. But if he can be induced to speak, when his ultimate recourse would have been to hold his tongue...then he has been caused to behave in a certain way. His freedom has been subjected to power...Many factors determine power...(it) involves a certain type of

rationality. It doesn't involve instrumental violence.” (Foucault 1990: 83-84)

But what if the dominant discourse had unintended effects? In this article we examine the possibilities that a “lean” discourse may actually create the conditions for the development of an oppositional workers’ consciousness and not a more cooperative one. While the subject of managerial manipulations of workers in order to autocratically control or “manufacture” their consent to production has been discussed at length (Burawoy 1979; Edwards, 1979; Gordon, Edwards and Reich, 1982) and detailed analysis of contemporary partnerships provided (Rubinstein 2001) very little of the work (Graham 1997; Milkman 1993) has been explicitly and empirically situated within the language and ideology of lean production.

Despite the employers’ hidden purpose for speaking what Huberto Nunez (2001) calls a “new language,” as work is reorganized and workers come to match theory with practice, the discourse of production unexpectedly converts a cooperative set of work relations into a fiercely antagonistic relationship. What ultimately develops is a battle between two contrary interpretations of work and the workplace. Managers use the language of empowerment to legitimize the introduction of new work systems. On the other hand, workers begin to re-interpret lean production as a managerial tool of deception. This worker centered view of the workplace then competes against powerful corporate attempts to shape employee identities according to their own imperatives.

The current research is based on surveys done with over 1,000 members of the United Auto Workers (UAW) employed at Mitsubishi Motors of America in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois. In addition to and preceding the survey, nearly two-dozen

focus group interviews were conducted with local union officers and stewards to determine how the new work organization had generated tensions among the workforce. Evaluating the effects of lean production on the workers' quality of work-life reveals that a discursive conflict has arisen over how to understand modern lean production work systems. At Mitsubishi there appears to be a fundamental contradiction between the discourse of production as spoken and the experiences of the workers working within that discourse. The tension between language and practice demands understanding and recognition; consequently, to meet those needs the workers have created their own way of talking about work life at Mitsubishi.

The article is divided into three sections. In order to provide a context for the story, the first section discusses the dominant discourse of production at Mitsubishi Motors. This discussion includes a brief overview of lean production in auto manufacturing and the history of Mitsubishi in Illinois, with particular attention given to the motivations and content of language used by management to talk about the production process. The second section addresses how the workers have developed a countervailing discourse of dissent, which has both reflected and reinforced the current level of employee dissatisfaction. To that end, consideration is given to the stories workers tell about their work lives and the language they use to tell those stories. Finally, the conclusion poses some critical questions about the potential effects of Mitsubishi's discourse of production on influencing a shopfloor consciousness.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Discursive Production of Lean

Originally called Diamond Star, Mitsubishi Motors was formed as a joint venture between Chrysler and Mitsubishi Motors. The plant was located on a “greenfield” site in Bloomington-Normal Illinois after an intensive competition among several midwestern states. Mitsubishi Motors has solely owned the facility since the company bought Chrysler’s 50 percent stake in 1991. The UAW represents the over 3,000 production and maintenance employees. Like other joint ventures in the auto industry, the company did not oppose union representation and the union was card-certified in late 1988.

When Diamond Star began production in the spring of 1989, the production and maintenance workers approached their jobs with great anticipation. Not only did these jobs offer significantly higher wages than most workers had made previously, they came with promises of employee empowerment.¹ Mitsubishi was a new type of factory for central Illinois. The need for labor flexibility was taken as given and was reflected both in the structure of work, and in the language used to talk about the workplace.

The organization of work at Mitsubishi and the language used by management paints a picture of a workplace based on egalitarian principals. Employee life is rife with the rhetoric of the social organization of work (i.e., teams, quality in station, continuous improvement and symbols of egalitarianism) often associated with lean production. The work units (made up of approximately 15-20 workers or “associates”) are called “groups” with line management done by “group leaders.” Group leaders are management employees. Among the rank and file workers there are only two job classifications: production and maintenance. As is typical in Japanese facilities, workers and managers

wear the same uniform and eat in the same cafeteria. Also typical of Japanese style management, terms like *kaizen* (to continually improve) and *wa* (literally meaning “harmony among people”) are regularly used. The language unfailingly emphasizes a partnership. Everyone from line supervisor to line worker is an associate creating a better car on behalf of a better future.

At Mitsubishi concepts like trust, cooperation, flexibility and teamwork are central to the orientation new employees receive. Each new job applicant is thoroughly screened for basic mechanical skills as well as his or her ability to work in a team. Workers are told that the company “wants and needs their input.” In reflecting on that period in the company, one production employee concluded: “I can’t describe to you how proud I was to work in such a clean plant. I was told repeatedly during the first two weeks of orientation how special I was to be hired... and I do remember all the phases I had to pass to become an employee...”

Indeed, the company does have an ongoing quality circle (i.e., voluntary groups of workers and managers meeting to discuss specific problems of production) and *kaizen* program. Proponents of continuous improvement schemes contend that they put decision-making power in the hands of the group. Working as a team, workers are asked to conceive of better ways of producing the product either through increased quality or productivity. The groups then compete with each other for prizes and the individual with the best *kaizen* project wins a trip to Japan.

The labor agreement also addresses management’s discourse of production with its emphasis on a mutual obligation to maintain an amicable work environment. Article I of the contract lays the foundation for this objective: “The Company and the Union

pledge to maintain a genuine and unreserved spirit of cooperation between all parties concerned in order to achieve and promote harmonious labor relations. The bedrock of cooperation is respect and dignity for each person. To attain the highest degree of cooperation from all parties there must be unqualified trust in each other...”²

The company’s responsibilities are understood to include: “[A] safe work place, equitable wages and benefits and will promote an environment based on the teamwork concept which establishes “Wa” or “harmony among people” in a non-adversarial environment that promotes mutual trust and respect.”³ The union’s obligations include: “[L]ong term cooperation in the recognition and commitment to the principle of flexibility that the Company must have to maintain and improve quality and efficiency and to the implementation of work practices and flexible production systems.”⁴

The contractual language and symbols used to describe work life at Mitsubishi emphasize “teamwork,” “trust,” “harmony,” “quality,” “efficiency,” and “flexibility.” Workers entered the company expecting to find a workplace structured in ways to liberate the workforce from mind-numbing tasks, permitting everyone to develop a variety of skills and to feel a connection between the tasks performed, and winning in the marketplace. In essence, workers were lead to believe that they would be able to satisfy their needs for creativity and control. But their high hopes were never realized. Instead of experiencing an empowering way to make cars the imposition of a lean system unleashed not only a collective physical reaction from workers, but also a new discursive struggle that forcefully critiqued the status quo thinking on new shopfloor relations. What emerges is a portrait of workers who are contesting management’s discourse of

production by inverting it into a discourse of dissent. That discourse, made up of the collective stories - the bits and pieces of language, actions and attitudes - of workers' lives makes clear that workers occupy a distinct oppositional position and are not powerless to contest the dominant discourse.

DATA AND METHODS

Employee attitudes at Mitsubishi Motors were analyzed in two phases. Phase one consisted of the authors visiting the plant, researching the history of the facility and participating in exploratory interviews with both union leadership and rank and file members. Interviews were conducted with two-dozen members of the local, including officers, stewards and committeemen. These interviews were held with the aim of assessing the key issues relevant to workers' evolving attitudes about lean production. Interviews, lasting roughly an hour, focused on the technical organization of work (ex. job rotation and cross training) and the social organization of production (ex. involvement in quality circle programs and kaizen projects). The results of extended open-ended discussions demonstrated that issues of power sharing and trust were paramount to worker dissatisfactions with Mitsubishi's version of lean production.

Equipped now with a better understanding of company practices and dominant worker concerns, a 64-question survey was constructed. This survey was designed to provide both time series data and cross-sectional information in order to look at both changes that have occurred at Mitsubishi Motors over time and to be able to compare the employer with other auto producers in the United States and Canada (Bruno and Jordan 1999; Lewchuk and Robertson 1997; Rinehart, Huxley, and Robertson, 1995). The survey was essentially divided into three parts. The first part of the survey replicated a

study conducted in 1989 at the then Diamond Star plant. These questions used a simple five-point Likert scale (“Very Negative to “Very Positive”). The existence of the earlier survey allowed us to compare employee attitudes and satisfaction with the organization of work during the two time periods.

The second and third sections contained questions intended to explain trends in employee attitudes toward work organization. Workers were asked to answer a series of thirty-five questions on work pace, changes in their job, skills and training and treatment by management. The survey also contained two open-ended questions. One asked the respondent to comment on their experience working on a quality circle project. The other asked for general comments about “work life and lean production.” Some of these questions were based on findings from previous research while others resulted from the interview process. Finally, due to the attention that certain elements like quality circles, kaizen and trust received during the interviews, they were given special survey attention.

In mid-September of 1997, the union local mailed a four-page survey to the homes of 3,000 bargaining unit members. While there were 3,214 union members employed at Mitsubishi surveys were only sent out to those with a valid address. From this single mailing 1090 usable responses (another 50 surveys were returned unopened) were received. This represented a 36 percent response rate.⁵ The actual number of respondents represents the largest single cohort of workers’ ever sampled in North America about their attitudes towards lean production.

The distribution of calculated surveys reflected the total population of the plant in terms of work group, location (5.5% stamping, 22.9% body shop, 38.4% paint, 55.9% trim and final assembly), seniority and shift work. Distinctions based on employment

data will be discussed at greater length below, but it is sufficient to note here that somewhat surprisingly the shift schedule was not a factor in explaining employee attitudes. Workers do not change shifts at Mitsubishi Motors and studies have noted that night-shift work may be inherently less appealing. The findings, however, revealed no statistical differences between day and night shift employee attitudes.

While differences in shift assignment did not reflect any statistical significance, plant seniority and work location were more sensitive variables. Results indicated that workers with greater seniority (7-9 years) harbored more negative views toward the company and work process, than their less senior peers (1-3 and 4-5 years). In addition, certain on-line job sights (ex. trim and final assembly) revealed higher negative views than the average of all workers.

It is also important to note that the median worker had eight years seniority indicating that at least half the respondents had worked in the plant when the first survey was done. While there is a reasonable possibility that some of the workers who were surveyed in 1989 may have also completed the 1999 survey, the latter survey cannot precisely reflect a direct comparison of changing employee attitudes over time.

RESULTS

But Not the Desired Kind

When Diamond Star began operations, workers approached their jobs with great anticipation and high hopes. But eight years later, worker attitudes had changed significantly and the promises of lean production lay shattered on the shop floor. What has emerged out of the stories the workers tell and the language they use to describe their experiences is a challenge to management's ideological control of the workplace.

In 1989 (Chapman, Elhance and Wenum) a sample of the employees were surveyed on their opinion of the work environment at Mitsubishi. They found that workers were overwhelmingly positive about their work lives (See Table 1). However, informal interviews in 1997 revealed that workers' attitudes now dramatically conflicted with the earlier data. In order to explore this change a larger employee attitudinal instrument was designed.

The earlier research results combined with the 1997 interviews and employee survey provide a provocative sketch of the evolution of lean work and employee attitudes. In 1989 fully 66 percent of the workers had a positive attitude about their work, nearly half had a positive attitude toward management, and 87 percent reported a favorable impression of the company's products. Eight years later, significantly different results are found. Characteristics like trust and cooperation that are the foundation of the social organization of a Post-Fordist workplace were viewed as nearly non-existent.

Diamond Star Motors Work Opinions, 1989-1997				
Characteristic	% Negative		% Positive	
	1989	1997	1989	1997
DSM Wages	13.7	2	51.1	92
Working Environment	11.3	40	66.2	23
Supervisors/Group Leaders	18.2	49	46.9	23
Managers/Upper Management	18.1	66	40.8	4
Asst. and Gen. Managers/Branch Managers	14.1	57	43.8	4
Colleagues	3.0	17	74.2	40
Union Activity	37.0	19	21.0	17
Union District Representative	n/a	19	n/a	38
Union Contract	n/a	36	n/a	19
Benefits	21.4	6	41.3	89
Work Satisfaction	17.7	38	56.5	38

Pride at Work	8.5	30	79.3	53
Personal Growth	21.8	38	57.4	26
Promotion	38.1	60	30.4	6
Quality Circles	n/a	62	n/a	11
Kaizen	n/a	72	n/a	9
DSM Products	5.6	9	87.8	55
DSM-Type Collaboration	n/a	6.7	n/a	72.2

While workers' satisfaction with their wages and benefits has increased significantly, in nearly every other area workers are less happy with their work lives. In 1989, nearly 50 percent of workers had a positive attitude about management, but only eight years later, only 23 percent had a positive view of their group leader and a miniscule 4 percent had a positive view of middle and upper management. On the other hand, workers' views of union activity seemed to improve. In brief, by 1997, workers displayed little pride in their work, were less positive about promotion possibilities, product quality and personal growth opportunities.

In interviews and responses to the open-ended questions employees noted changes that had occurred at Mitsubishi over the course of eight years. For instance, workers who had been at the facility since it opened noted that they believed that the company "used to care" about shopfloor life. In the beginning, the company conducted daily exercises and group meetings were held. On the line, they had full rotations and cycle times workers considered reasonable. However, according to several of the workers, as the company sought to increase production, much of this practice was discarded. One worker explained: "I started out driving a fork lift, four years later, once I got on the assembly line I learned about the over-cycled jobs, parts that wouldn't fit, bad rotations and plain poor quality." For workers it was not just that the company had changed, but that their expectations were never fulfilled. They had come into the

company with high hopes, believing “that this manufacturing job would be different, [and] better.”⁶ Those hopes proved to be not only quixotic, but a source of significant antagonism.

In conversations with employees, there was an obvious tension between the experience of the workers at Mitsubishi Motors and its symbols of equality including common uniforms, shared parking lots, “associates” and the language of “empowerment,” “teamwork,” and “quality.” The dissonance between the workers’ experiences and the company’s attempts to legitimize and reify a new production method had invoked an oppositional discourse. For example, it was common for workers to refer to their employer as “Mitsushitsi.” Group leaders were referred to as “lemon heads,” because despite common uniforms, leaders wore yellow hard hats. Unit group leaders were often called “uglies,” and quality circles referred to as “dog and pony shows.” But the workers’ discourse is more than the language they use; it’s the stories they tell and the assumptions they make about the production process. At Mitsubishi that discourse is most often characterized by “broken promises,” “mean production” and “powerlessness.”

Remarkably, workers discontent can be traced back to the hiring process. Approximately 60 percent of the workers interviewed saw the selection process as a source of disappointment. The company’s hiring procedures include several days of intensive screening and testing. During the process, the company emphasizes the involvement of employees in decision-making and the role of kaizen in the functioning of the plant. It is worth noting that workers at the facility acknowledge the company’s desire to organize a highly educated work force. Indeed many of the workers have

college degrees. But hiring educated people to make cars does not insure an educated approach to the car-making process.

Workers explained that the company tells new hires that they will be asked for their intellectual input, but then contrary to promise, treats them as “beasts of burden.” One worker who had held several factory jobs previous to coming to Mitsubishi summed up the situation by saying, “If you hire some dumb shit who is used to being a grunt, he’ll come to work, work hard, take the paycheck and leave. But if you hire the folks the company seems to focus on, they’re always on their way to a better job; and if not, they actually come in expecting the company to listen to them. They get real disappointed.”⁷ Thus, by abstracting the workers intelligence from their physical labor the company has produced a “negation of identity” that gives further “rise to social antagonisms” (Torfing 1999: 120).

While management’s discourse stresses “harmony, “trust” and “teamwork,” their actions inspire individuals to oppose managerial decisions. Ironically, a letter written by a group leader to upper management provided an example of such resistance. In the letter, the leader explained that in return for “kaizenizing out” (i.e., eliminating) a production job his group was promised it would maintain the person as a utility worker. Based on that promise, the workers eliminated a job and increased their own work speed. But only three days later the utility worker was removed and transferred to another group. The unit’s group leader’s was so disturbed by this event that he admonished his superiors that such “behavior reduced the associates’ willingness to participate in such projects.”⁸

Another story repeated by interviewed workers stressed how management used the production system against them. At Mitsubishi, like other lean auto plants, workers have access to stoplights. Workers are told that the lights are there so those workers can stop the line in case of quality problems. However, in practice workers are disciplined for using the lights. One particular group responded to this “Catch-22” situation in a very ingenious fashion. For an entire shift they ran a particularly over-zealous group leader from one end of the line to the other to check to see why a stoplight had been hit. After one day of covert resistance the group leader backed off on administering any form of discipline. To the workers, the issue of stoplights seems to serve as a symbol of the lack of worker control. One of the shared jokes on the floor referenced a SATURN car company commercial. In the television ad the assembly worker says, “I remember the day I stopped the line.” The workers at Mitsubishi laugh and respond, “I bet he did. That’s the day they ripped him a new asshole.”

From the workers perspective, kaizen and quality circle projects have lost their daily relevance. To be sure, the company continues to encourage quality circle presentations of new ideas and winners compete in company-wide competitions. But the practice’s emphasis on large money saving ideas has born unexpected costs. Smaller suggestions are often overlooked and the nature of continuous improvement diminished. Workers complain that the projects that would make their lives better are overlooked and that management only cares if it will impact the bottom line or make “them look good.”

Employee interviews also revealed that the structure of the group served as an additional strain of discontent. As members of management, unit group leaders (GL) lead group meetings, assign work and determine rotations. The exact nature of the

relationship between the GL and the group is determined more by the personality of the GL than by the general culture of the facility. Under the terms of the applicable contract, each group could have an elected “team” leader who would be a bargaining unit member. The presence of a team leader, however, is at the discretion of management and the company has not exercised its prerogative. Even if such a position existed, it is not clear what the role of the individual would be. As group members, the employees have no real voice other than through traditional union channels. In an interview, one employee recounted that when he made suggestions about how to improve production, he was told by a group leader, “take your \$20 an hour and shut the fuck up.” Yet, the language of teamwork remains and workers are expected to pick up the load when other workers cannot get the job done.

Workers seem frustrated with the rhetoric of empowerment in an environment offering no real power. The use of team operations is an informative example. When the plant was opened quality circles were ubiquitous. But eight years later only 33.9 percent of respondents stated that they had a “functioning quality circle” in their work area. Despite the contemporary absence of circles, workers’ experience with them was widespread. Only 7.5 percent of respondents admitted to never having been part of a QC, and of those who had, a significant 62 percent were left with very negative attitudes. When asked more specifically about circles, 57.9 percent of surveyed workers felt that “management” exclusively benefits from QC. On the other hand, less than a third of respondents said that “everyone” benefits from QC. In addition, there was universal discontent across departments with QC, although paint shop employees recorded higher unfavorable responses (69.9%) than their peers (stamping-52.4%, body-60.4%, and

trim/final assembly-56.4%) did. In fact only ten percent of all workers rated their experience “favorable,” or “very favorable” (See Table 2 and 3).

-- Table 2 and 3 --

Respondents’ attitudes were similarly hostile towards kaizens. Nearly one-half (49.4 percent) of respondents had a negative impression of kaizen. Worker comments were illustrative of why the idea and practice of “continuous improvement” was no longer respected. Many said they opted out because either the group leader was taking their ideas and relaying them as his/her own, or because they felt favoritism was given to friends of the group leader as a way for “suck-ups to get some overtime” (See Table 4).

-- Table 4 --

Failure to carry through on promises of empowerment and involvement had the related but not unexpected effect of increasing the workforces’ suspicions about management’s intentions. The key question posed to workers dealt with their belief in management’s truthfulness about desiring employee participation. However, because truthfulness is not best captured by all or nothing choices, a degree of honest behavior was identified. Therefore, instead of querying if management was trustworthy, workers were asked, “How trustworthy is management”? The answer given by nearly three-quarters (72.7 percent) of the respondents was “not very often,” or “never.” Unfortunately, time served only aggravated the trust issue. A third (33.4 percent) of the most senior workers judged management never to be trustworthy, while 24.7 percent of their most junior peers felt the same. While about a quarter (25.3 percent) admitted to trusting management “sometime,” only a minuscule 2 percent said, “all of the time” (See

Table 5). These responses suggest that after eight years of lean production a super majority of workers have come to seriously question the company's integrity.

-- Table 5 --

A Harsh Worker Language

More striking was the degree to which workers used common derogatory language to describe their work experience in the survey's only two open-ended questions. The first question asked the respondent to "describe [their] experience working on a QC project." The other asked for general comments about "work life and lean production." A robust 52.4 percent (n = 572) of respondents included a written answer to the QC question, while approximately a third (34.4 percent/n = 375) of the workers took the time to answer the question soliciting their personal thoughts about lean production. While it would be interesting to know more about the differences between those respondents that took the time to write out an opinion and those that did not, it is remarkable that so many respondents provided a written narrative to examine.

Using a key word/phrase search approach, the authors began identifying and calculating written answers. The authors and a research assistant read each narrative once. Descriptive words or phrases that expressed an attitude (i.e., "good idea, "waste of time...etc) towards lean production or QC were recorded and added to a master list of responses. Words were then coded as "positive," negative or "neutral" and displaced into separate categories. Uncertainty over how terms should be evaluated was discussed and a code agreed upon. After all of the comments were recorded and identified as "positive," negative," or "neutral," words and phrases were grouped according to their similarity. In many case respondents had used comparable words or phrases to

communicate the same feeling. In order to better report the substance of these comments, the authors decided to identify certain dominant phrases as representing a number of strongly held views.

QC Experience

The most often reported comment (19.9 percent) from respondents to the written QC experience question was that there was “no support from management” or “from workers” for conducting projects. Worker caution may have been explained by the 18.6 percent who reported that the structure was set up to “benefit management,” was “dictated by management,” or existed only to pursue a “bottom-line focus” (i.e., produce more cars cheaper and faster). Another 6.6 percent of workers stated that their QC ideas were “rejected” or “stolen” by management. Some workers (5.9 percent) even used phrases like “dog and pony show” and “it’s a joke” to describe their QC experiences. In addition, 17.6 percent of workers were critical of QC because there was not “enough time to do anything,” “nothing ever gets done,” and “ideas never get implemented.” Workers (7.3 percent) also complained that QC were only begun when there was a need to “earn some overtime,” or “to clean up,” or “to show favoritism to someone.” A handful of workers (4.3 percent) chose to sum up their feelings by just saying that QC were “bad” and a “waste of time.” In summary, 93 percent of those workers who took the time to comment about QC at Mitsubishi had only negative comments to offer (See Table 6).

-- Table 6 --

Work Life Under Lean Production

The nature of the responses was not much different when workers wrote general comments about work life under lean production. Over a third (35.2 percent) of them said that “poor managerial leadership” and “inconsistent application of company policies” had “hurt efficiency” resulting in a “loss of worker morale.” Worker morale was likely negatively effected by what 14.0 percent of respondents declared was a “lack of time to do anything good” because the assembly line could not be slowed down. Line speed and production at all cost probably helps to explain why nearly one-quarter (24.8 percent) complained, “safety is neglected,” work has become more “physically rigorous” and that scheduling has “severely damaged family time.” Workers (7.7 percent) commented that they had “no say” over how work was done, that there was a “lack of communication” and that “they are not taken seriously by management.” For a small number of workers (6.6 percent) the “union” itself was deemed culpable for how lean production was implemented and experienced. As was true with workers comments about QC, a stunning 96.0 percent of the volunteered narrative about work life at Mitsubishi Motors was negative (See Table 7).

-- Table 7 --

It is apparent that a conflict has arisen at Mitsubishi over how to understand modern lean production work systems. The cooperative language presented by management to workers diverges from the actual way that workers think and speak about efforts to restructure the auto assembly process. On the one hand, management’s discourse of production claims to liberate the workforce from the numbing mentality of bureaucracy. It claims to remove job barriers that rob the hourly worker of his/her

capacity to develop and use different skills. In sharp contrast, the workers describe the new structure of production in the following terms: “Anytime my group comes up with something we think would help make our jobs easier or better, management says NO!” Employee participation “just gives them (management) a way to add more work to our already over loaded stations.” Moreover, workers complain that, “management rarely takes your ideas seriously.”

Despite the recruitment of a creative and innovative workforce, workers feel that control is still in the hands of management and that changes will occur only when they are beneficial to the company’s financial bottom line. Workers admitted in their survey responses that they are “told what you can work on” and that “the group has no input.” They angrily proclaim that “management runs it” and that “management will go a long way if it will benefit them.” Mitsubishi promises that as part of their empowerment program workers will receive extensive training, yet workers report they “never get any feedback,” and that “no training,” or “time is allowed to prepare.”

Management’s rhetoric suggests that they want worker input and that worker contributions will be valued. Yet in talking about quality circles workers tell a different story. Far from valuing their input workers are told to “pick up a broom and sweep!” and above all else to “keep the line running.” Management argues that new technology will be coordinated with job redesign to satisfy workers’ needs for creativity and control. Yet in their day to day lives workers say they “never have enough people” to do the job well and the company’s repeated refrain to creative suggestions is “no – it would cost \$\$\$.”

Thus while management’s discourse of production includes job restructuring, flexibility, work teams, enhanced skill competencies, workplace learning and technology,

the workers' discourse of dissent is one of intra-worker competition, stolen ideas, broken promises, managerial advancement, staged behavior, time deficit and production obsession. In summary, the workers' framework exposes management's true intentions by inverting the meaning of the above referenced items. For every sanitized company-defined lean production component, the workers have communicated their own "shop-talk" version (See Table 8).

-- Table 8 --

DISCUSSION

A Radicalized Workforce?

To suggest that the workers at Mitsubishi have completely rejected the discourse of capital accumulation would be to overstate the evidence. Rather than rejecting the lean structure workers are challenging the discourse *where* it conflicts with their experiences. According to Mitsubishi workers the point of resistance came when there was a need to increase production and to speed up the line. Is, however, a discourse of resistance a symptom of job consciousness? And if so where will it lead? To be sure, workers need not always think of themselves as an oppositional group in order for them to understand that they have distinct and separate interests from management. But will workers begin to fundamentally challenge the underlying discourse of "economic rationality" or as Heckscher (1995) has argued, will they simply change their level of loyalty in reaction to a clearer view of management?

Survey results and interviews with Mitsubishi Motors employees in 1997 revealed a workforce severely disappointed in their work lives. This finding was in stark contrast to the attitudinal survey conducted in 1989. Apparently, as workers gained more

experience in a lean production environment, their positive estimations of the environment declined. The shift in employee attitudes has been significant. Perhaps the magnitude of that shift is a result of the promise the workers felt in the beginning.

The irony here is that it was the contradiction between management's discourse of empowerment and their shopfloor behavior that led workers to construct a mocking reinterpretation of how to understand their work lives. Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) have suggested that "even the smallest gains in employee autonomy and participation in decision-making can plant the seeds for deeper emancipatory power... they may begin to grasp that the social reality of the workplace is malleable, that it is a social construction which they have helped build" (113). At Mitsubishi, however, it seems it was not so much the taste of power but the promise that made workers recognize their subjugated position. The promise that was meant to mask domination actually revealed it.

At first glance the discourse of lean production was a failure in legitimizing "economic rationality." By 1997, the workers saw their interests as separate from management. They were telling stories of frustration, alienation and a desire for increased control over their work lives. But upon a closer look, had management's discourse failed? The workers resistance seemed to be based on broken promises more than on a condemnation of the entire for-profit system. In effect, workers wanted the system promised to them. More importantly, production at Mitsubishi never stopped.

If work discourses are created in both content (i.e., production practices) and form (i.e., language of production) what will be the shopfloor impact of the workers' discourse of dissent? During the 1998 union contract campaign, according to then-local president Chuck Kearny, workers were within three minutes of a strike and ready to walk. This

was a significant change from previous years when workers would not have been willing to stage a work stoppage. The result was a negotiated contract considered by the union to be the most successful to date.

Yet, the threat of withholding labor was at the time, preempted by other contemporary events. Retired Ford executives replaced Japanese management and subsequently, a new discourse of the “the bottom line” emerged. Instead of promises of empowerment, management, in Kearny’s words, offered this warning; “we better work together or this plant will close.” The Ford leadership has made clear that within the terms of the contract, they are the bosses and things will be done their way. The local union agrees. As president Kearney colorfully noted about the days of empowerment “the shit wasn’t going to float much longer. We had to make changes.” Interestingly, labor and management now seem to be unified around the same objective -- fighting to keep the plant open. What happened to the workers autonomous discourse of dissent?

In the interest of efficiency a buyout was offered to reduce the workforce. Five hundred workers accepted \$53,000 and as a result their jobs were given to already over-cycled workers. Speed-up in the name of survival has replaced the goal of empowerment. Interestingly, many of the individuals who took the buyout were the ones most disappointed in the lack of control they had over their work. In the words of a local union official these were the workers who “didn’t want to think of themselves as just auto workers.”

In truth, the workers continue to see some interests as distinct from those of management and now increasingly turn to the union in an attempt to gain some control in their workplace. But the objective seems to have changed. If yesterday the end was job

control today the preferred outcome is job security. In describing a noticeable rank-and-file move toward the union, Kearney acknowledged that the workers “were people disenchanted with the system...the company has driven them to us.” No longer suffering from a false consciousness, “they were people who had had enough.” Kearney’s description of worker attitudes proved prophetic, when in the summer of 2001 workers’ language militancy transfigured into collective physical resistance. What had once seemed an impossible scenario had come to pass; Local 2488 struck the Mitsubishi Motor Manufacturing Company of America. It was the first strike in the Bloomington-Normal plant’s 12-year history. After a one-day walkout over stalled contract talks, UAW 2488 negotiated a new labor agreement that included significant improvements in work standards, line speed and cycle times. With over 90 percent of the ranks voting on the deal the contract was ratified by 80 percent of the membership.

In light of the work stoppage, what has management’s discourse of lean production spawned? It would certainly seem that a heightened level of union-consciousness has been achieved. A workplace that was ostensibly created to promote labor-management cooperation has acted very much like a traditional, adversarial auto assembly plant. But despite (or because of) the strike’s “us versus them” message, the ideological battle is likely to be ratcheted up. Management is certain to refocus their ideological approach in order to deploy a new discourse that co-opts any understanding of the social construction of work that Mitsubishi employees have developed. Ford executives and bottom-line appeals aside, management needs to construct a cooperative workforce. However the ideological struggle unfolds, what will likely survive is something familiar. As Henry Ford demonstrated at the dawn of the command-control

workplace, the disciplining of labor-power still requires a mix of repression, co-optation and cooperation. Fordist or not, the workplace remains a contested terrain.

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Table 2. How would you rate you experience working on a QC project?		
Item	Percent	N
Very Favorable	3.0%	29
Favorable	7.8%	76
OK	30.8%	302
Unfavorable	31.1%	304
Very Unfavorable	27.4%	268

Table 3. Who benefits most often from QC projects?		
Item	Percent	N
Management	57.9%	560
Workers	11.0%	106
Everyone	29.8%	288
No one	1.3 %	13

Table 4. How do you feel about Kaizen?		
Item	Percent	N
Very Negative	27.6%	287
Negative	21.8%	226
No Strong Feelings	37.2%	387
Positive	9.8%	102
Very Positive	3.6%	37

Table 5. How trustworthy is management?		
Item	Percent	N
All the time	2.0%	21
Sometime	25.3%	264
Not very often	40.7%	424
Never	32.0%	334

Table 6. Dominant worker comments about QC experience.		
Comments	Percent	N
No Support from Management/Workers	19.9	114
Only Benefits Management/Bottom Line Focus	11.5	66
Not enough time to do anything	9.6	55
Purely Descriptive Phrases	8.3	48
Nothing gets done/ Ideas never get implemented	8.0	46
QC Works Sometimes/I Personally Benefit	8.0	46
Done for Overtime/to Clean Up/to Show Favoritism	7.3	42
Ideas Dictated by Management	7.1	41
Ideas Rejected/Stolen by Management	6.6	38
Dog & Pony Show/It's a Joke	5.9	34
Bad/ a Waste of Time	4.3	25
Lack of QC Training	1.5	9
Undetermined	1.3	8

Table 7. Dominant worker comments about work life under lean production.		
Comments	Percent	N
Poor and Inconsistent Management/Low Efficiency/Low Morale	35.2	132
Safety is a Problem/Work More Rigorous/No Family Time	25.0	93
Not Enough Time To Do Anything	14.0	52
Workers Have No Say/Are Not Taken Seriously/No Communication	7.7	29
The Union is a Problem	6.6	25
Sexual and Racial Attitudes of Workers and Managers	3.2	12
Undetermined	2.9	11
Pay and Benefits the Only Reason to Work Here	2.4	9
No Complaints/Positives Statements About Job	1.6	6

Table 8. Comparison of company and worker interpretation of lean production/employee involvement components.	
Job Restructuring	
Company	Workers
Liberate the workforce from bureaucracy and allow everyone to see and feel the connection between work tasks and winning in the marketplace	Anytime my group comes up with something we think would help make our jobs better or more meaningful, management says NO!
Flexibility	
Remove job barriers that rob the hourly worker of his/her capacity to develop and use different skills.	Just gives management ways to add more work to our already over loaded stations.
Employee Participation	
Involving employees at all levels of problem solving and decision-making fosters work innovation and develops self-esteem.	Management rarely takes your ideas seriously and they have the last say
Competencies and Skills	
Extensive training and continuous improvement will increase the individual worker's value to the company.	We never get any feedback or training; we seem to just go through the motions and there is never enough time to prepare
Workplace Learning	
The work environment will provide the individual worker with the means to acquire the skills necessary to make career choices.	Its all about picking up a broom and sweeping or doing upper management a favor; but always keep the line running.
Technology	
New technology will be coordinated with job redesign to satisfy workers' needs for creativity an control.	Just save money and material; become more productive with less people.

Notes

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1. Authors interview with Mitsubishi employee, May, 1997.
 2. MMMA-UAW Contract, Ratified August 27, 1995, p. 2.
 3. MMMA-UAW Contract, Ratified August 27, 1995, p. 3.
 4. MMMA-UAW Contract, Ratified August 27, 1995. p. 3.
 5. No management personnel were surveyed, because the company declined two invitations to participate.
 6. Authors interview with employee, November, 1996.
 7. Authors interview with employee, May, 1997.
 8. Author interviews and letter addressed to general manager (**Date?**).