INTRODUCTION

The focus of the following essay is a small factory which makes electrical connectors. Situated in a rural community in the Great Lakes industrial belt, Electric Inc. employs some 400 industrial and 100 white-collar workers. The study is taken from interviews and discussions with men and women who worked or are working in this factory. While some of the history and many of the operational details of Electric Inc. could be learned without talking to the people who actually worked there, much of the history and all of the factory experience had to be collected from the men and women who shaped them.

Beginning in November 1972, I worked in this shop intermittently for 14 months until July 1974, when I was fired for “absenteeism.” I and many of my co-workers suspect that the real reason for my dismissal was my union and extraunion activity. During the latter two of my stints in the factory, I acted as shop steward for the women on second shift in the aluminum-assembly department. As a steward I began to see and study the connection between the patterns of social interaction in the shop and the informal resistance to management that I saw around me. After my dismissal, I continued my research, interviewing dozens of workers and studying seniority lists, union contracts and files, strike papers, shop memos, newspaper
articles, tax and property records, and numerous other items that workers either saved and shared with me or pilfered for me. This article, with the names altered, is a condensed version of their story.

**CLARENCE LONG’S SHOP**

Electric Inc. was founded in 1927 when George and Leo Heilemann began to manufacture electrical connectors in an old garage behind their house. Within a decade they had moved their business to an abandoned machine shop in the nearby industrial city of Lakeside, where they employed some 50 workers. (The experiences of these workers, which include trade-union activity with all three of the major electrical workers’ unions between 1936 and 1964, have been deleted to save space.) In 1942, the Heilemanns began an experiment to cut production costs. They arranged for one of their foremen, Clarence Long, to distribute the shop’s assembly work among his friends and relatives living in a rural area some 20 miles south of Lakeside. Most of those home-industry workers were either handicapped persons, senior citizens, or young mothers whose husbands had been drafted.

This putting-out system continued until 1945, when Federal inspectors investigated the operation. Long’s business violated the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 which prescribed a minimum wage, regulated hours, required an operator’s license, and outlined special provisions for the employment of handicapped persons. Rather than meet the standards, Long and the Heilemanns centralized the work of the home industry in an old garage located in Town, a rural community some 20 miles from Lakeside. Former employees who were physically able came to work in the Town shop. According to Clarence Long, “even some of the children who had helped their mothers with the assembling and packing work at home” became employees, “when they were old enough to work in a shop.” The original workforce was composed chiefly of older women and men, who Long said were “people too old to get work elsewhere.”

In 1946 the Heilemanns leased their entire assembly department to Long, and he installed a few more machines and hired more workers. Production continued at the old garage until the floors began to sag under the weight of the machinery. Sometime around 1950 Long moved from this building to a renovated horse stable located just a mile from Town. Thomas Kyper, a handicapped worker, recalled that there were about 50 workers in the new shop, and “90 percent of them were local women.” In most cases they were supplementing marginal farm incomes with factory wages.

Of the many hats Long wore, owner, president, chief mechanic, janitor, he excelled at being the social director. Over the years he developed what one worker described as “a very special relationship with his workers.” Workers recalled that he was fair about giving time off to farmers in the
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workforce when agricultural chores were especially pressing. Harriet Johnston remembered that:

Farmers were given time off to do haying, planting, harvesting. Women with children in school could come in late after they had gotten the kids off to school. It was one big happy family. Long worked right alongside of the workers.

According to Thomas Kyper:

Some of the workers borrowed money from Long. Often times he advanced pay checks. All holidays, birthdays, and departures were celebrated with parties held during shop time and gifts from Long. Mr. Long had an ideal relationship with his workers. He made coffee for the people in the morning.

Doris Blake expressed the recurring theme of discussions about the early period of the shop’s history when she described Long’s shop as

one big happy family. We were the happiest bunch anyone had known. Every holiday was celebrated. . . . Ham and turkeys for Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Jason Sheldon recalled that:

Clarence was more on the ball than any other subsequent management. Long was a lenient employer, although his motives were not always pure. It was one big happy family under Long. [He] socialized with the people in the plant—went hunting and fishing with them. They were all friends [who] knew each other’s personal problems. Long was friendly with all his help. He visited the workers at their homes. If he arrived at suppertime, he would have dinner with them.

Relationships between Clarence Long and the workers may have been ideal, but working conditions were not. By 1950, production included assembly work, machine tooling, packing, shipping, and chemical processing, work identical to that being done in Lakeside. But wages were 30 to 50 percent lower. At least one worker in Long’s shop of the early fifties protested against unhealthy working conditions.

Helen Fields had gone to work because she had to support her family while her husband was bedridden with a serious illness. Her brother, sister-in-law, aunt and niece, many friends and neighbors already worked for Long. When Fields complained that the ventilation system in the degreaser room was inadequate and that the fumes were making her sick, Long showed her a recent state inspector’s report which certified the system. Unsatisfied with this response, Fields quit her job and took Long to court, not for compensation, but to force him to install the proper ventilation system and to warn other workers of the potential health hazard. Although the court took no action, pressure from Long’s insurance company achieved the same end.
Militancy, Union Politics, and Workers' Control

Helen Fields explained her suit against Long by saying that she was "for the working people." She claimed to have no grudge against Long. Rather she held the state inspectors and insurance agents responsible for the bad working conditions. As evidence of her admiration for Long, she recalled an incident when she had defended him against some women who were complaining about Long and his work practices. In response to their complaints, she told them to go and take "a look in that piece of glass over there. See those gray hairs. Now be thankful that there is a Clarence Long who would hire old women like us and give us an opportunity to earn a living."

To compensate for the low wages, which in 1952 averaged 50 cents per hour, there were "good" health-insurance benefits, steady work, and "plenty of overtime." Throughout the shop's history, workers could recall only one slowdown, sometime in the fifties, presumably during the recession which followed the Korean War. But even this slowdown was not taken too seriously. Doris Blake recalled that during this time:

Mr. Long went around to the women and asked them if any of them wanted some time off to clean their homes or to get caught up on their sewing, or what have you . . . , or if there was something they cared to do that they were behind in . . .

Doris Blake also recalled that many farmer husbands of the women workers took advantage of the insurance benefits to have operations for hernias, "which they had been carrying around for years." Other fringe benefits included the "good deals" on hunting and fishing gear Long could get through his connections with local merchants. Equally important to the farmers and housewives was the flexible work schedule, which could be adjusted to meet specific needs. Given these conditions it is not surprising that just about all the workers felt that they could best represent their interests as individuals.

Thus when organizers from the United Electrical Workers came "to talk" to Long's employees, they did not receive an enthusiastic response. At least four other factors contributed to the workers' lack of interest in the union. First, there is evidence that the UE international representative may have been an FBI agent paid to sabotage the union's efforts here and elsewhere. Second, the late forties were hard times, leaving Long's workers in no position to risk their jobs. Third, Long did not want a union in his shop, and he talked against it. According to Long, "a union is hard on a small shop." Harriet Johnston, who never saw the need for a union throughout her 30 years of working experience, remembered that:

Clarence used to say [to his workers] "now I don't want a union in here . . . You get a union and I'll close the doors." Or [he would say] "If you get a union in here, I'm leaving, I'm not sticking around."

At the one informal "free election" the UE organizers held, Long watched while the workers raised their hands to defeat the union.
Fourth, the workers already had something of an informal shop decision-making procedure. Harriet Johnston recalled the “big meetings” held during company time when Long would ask for people’s opinions and advice “on things.” Mary Ellen Paulson remembered that the workers and Long “communicated” at the shop meetings he organized.

He’d tell the workers that he had so much money to spend on wages and would ask how they thought it should be divided. One decision we made was whether to have longer breaks or extra paid holidays.

These informal arrangements began to deteriorate in 1955 when Lawrence Dunlitz bought the Lakeside factory and its Town branch. He “re-tired” the Heilemann brothers, retained Long as president of Electric Inc., and moved the company from the remodeled horse stable to a recently constructed machine shop located on the east side of Town, just two miles from the old shop. Too old to get work elsewhere most of the workers “stuck with Long,” though Harriet Johnston remembered that “some of the younger ones went to Westinghouse in Lakeside, to get higher wages.” Those who stayed behind had reached, according to Harriet, that “certain age” when employers “just don’t hire you anymore.”

Shortly after this move, Dunlitz had a foundry built behind the new machine shop. According to Matt Conda, one of the first men to work in the foundry, his co-workers “were older men who came to work at Long’s foundry through friendships,” even though wages were low and the foundry was not close to their homes. Conda recalled that these men left other jobs to work for Long, and he suspected that they hoped to find more relaxed working conditions than existed in other foundries in the vicinity. Electric Inc. had acquired a reputation for having lax work rules, and stories are still told about Conda’s frequent trips to local bars after lunch breaks to round up his crew for the second half of the shift. It is also rumored that beer was a popular summer beverage in the foundry.

Drunken or otherwise, the foundry workers were responsible for bringing the first union to Town. Unlike their counterparts in the machine shop, these men were neither marginal farmers, unskilled workers, local residents, nor recipients of Long’s benevolence. It took them less than a year to conclude that plant expansion and Dunlitz’s managerial policies had to be countered with organized activity. In 1960 they forced Long to recognize a union we will call the International Metal Workers, an organization already familiar to many of them. Rather than forming a separate local, the men at Electric Inc. joined a Metal Workers’ local in Lakeside. According to Long, the foundry workers were “men who had always known a union and who wouldn’t work without one. They were tough cats.”

Three years after the foundry went union, the NLRB certified the Metal Workers to represent production and maintenance workers in the machine shop. Of the 63 eligible voters, 45 voted for the Metal Workers and 12
against them. There was no other union on the ballot, although five or six employees already belonged to the Pattern Makers Union. Everyone I interviewed remembered that Dunlitz and Long were the most ardent supporters the union had, with the one exception of Oscar Mucker, the union district representative. Mary Ellen Paulson, for example, remembered that "Long went around and asked his oldest workers, who didn't want a union, to support the Metal Workers in the machine shop because he wanted them to." Harriet Johnston had not forgotten how "they kept preaching to us 'union, union.'" Long asked her "to support the Metal Workers union coming into the machine shop," though before "he had always talked against it." Thomas Kyper explained that:

When the Lakeside company decided that there had to be a union in the Town shop, Long was instructed to send his foremen around to tell the workers that they had to have the Metal Workers.

After the union election, Long "left the company." The details of his resignation are not known to me, but there were many rumors on the subject, and Long's own vagueness about it lends them support. Harriet Johnston thought that "things just got too big for Clarence to handle. He didn't have the education to run a big company," she explained. Others thought that Long was involved in some shady deals. Still others said that Long had just mismanaged the shop and when Dunlitz realized this, he reluctantly asked him to resign. A year after Long resigned, Dunlitz closed the Lakeside factory and moved the entire business to Electric Inc.

Subsequent managements have been unable to imitate Long's informal managerial style. From the beginning Dunlitz had the "wrong attitude" towards the workers, best summed up in his remark that they were "dumb farmers." The most obvious consequence of Dunlitz's managerial policies were turnover rates which during the 1960s increased from "one or two workers every eight or nine months" to "sixty to eighty workers every month." According to Thomas Kyper, "many of these people would quit and be hired back. The company had some kind of unwritten rule that they would rehire at least four times." Either unwilling or unable to treat workers as individuals with unique personalities, problems and needs, Dunlitz tried to rule the shop through the union. Though the union officials were willing to co-operate, the workers were not.

THE UNION

Mary Ellen Paulson recalled that "it took about a year for people in the machine shop to discover that the Metal Workers was a company union." To earn this reputation, the union participated in management's efforts to formalize work practices and to establish a strict code of shop regulations. Everyone in the shop has a favorite union story. With bitterness disguised as cynicism, these stories reveal the callousness of the trade unionism practiced
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by the Metal Workers and the corruption intrinsic to the union’s bureaucratic structure. Union officers at Electric Inc. acted as “hatchet men” for the company. They “looked the other way” when the company ignored the union contract. They talked down to the membership, without trying either to understand their grievances or to fight for their interests.

A typical incident involved Arthur Hooke, until recently a powerful union officer, and Doris Blake a woman with 21 years seniority who was forced to retire. Doris was old and the company considered her a safety risk. Hook and other union officers remained silent while the company ignored seniority rules and demoted her from punch press to grinding, the worst department in the shop. At one point in this campaign, Hooke told Doris Blake that she was “too old to work.” Though this was undoubtedly true, she could not afford to retire. Nevertheless, Doris Blake lost her job in 1973 and died two years later, a broken and bitter woman.

Until recently irresponsible men and women held union office because few workers bothered to vote in union elections. In the 1974 election for chief steward, less than 60 of the 400 workers eligible to vote cast a ballot. Union offices have been used as stepping stones to managerial posts. Four foremen, a personnel manager, a plant supervisor, and several other managerial employees formerly served as union officers. Although this union to management mobility represents a well-worn pattern, the problem is not one of personal weakness alone. The union’s hierarchical structure and constricted conception of change have waylaid even the best-intentioned union officer.

The union’s eagerness to do the company’s dirty work, and the ease with which the company snatched union officers to fill managerial positions, discouraged the rank and file. What little support the union had in the beginning quickly dissipated. Less than 30 of the 63 workers eligible to join the union after the NLRB election joined willingly, while initiation fees were automatically deducted from the wages of the others. Within a year after the NLRB election, the rank and file stopped voting in union elections or attending union meetings. Workers who tried at different times to reform the union and to make it responsible to the rank and file either ran up against brick walls or accepted managerial positions offered by the company. The union came into the shop from the top, and it never developed more than a perfunctory interest in the rank and file and their grievances.

Although wages were half the national average for machine-shop workers, the Metal Workers never called a strike. Workers walked out in 1971 and 1974 over the objections of both company and union. In November 1971, workers struck Electric Inc. for the first time in shop history. Wages and the length of the new contract were the central issues. During the strike, which lasted three weeks, union officers negotiated with the company but ignored the strikers. The rank and file, however, remained solid behind their demand for a 26-month contract, ten months short of the usual contract
length. Though both company and union opposed this demand, they were forced to concede before workers would agree to return to work.

Two days before Christmas, workers ratified the latest union-company offer by a slim margin. The wage increase, which was the highest in the company's history, amounted to 18 cents per hour effective December 17, 1971, and 43 cents over the next two years. By 1974 this settlement brought the average wage for a machine-shop worker to $2.93 per hour, plus incentive and overtime. At that rate annual income was approximately $6,500, an inadequate amount even in 1972, when a moderate annual income for a family of four was $11,000, according to United States Government calculations.

After a bitter and discouraging struggle, workers had won a wage increase and a 26-month contract. Unsatisfied, "a few workers" expressed anti-union and anti-company sentiments by refusing to pick up advanced paychecks the company issued on December 23 to brighten the Christmas season. According to one woman worker, it was "like a slap in the face. We were serious about the strike, and wanted to stay out. Could have stayed out. We didn't need [the company's] help."

Wages, extended benefits, and a company-proposed Job Evaluation Plan were issues in 1974, when once again workers walked out over the objections of both company and union. Job Evaluation quickly became the key issue in this strike, which lasted a week. The incentive system at Electric Inc., a remnant of the Long era, had to be overhauled because workers were "beating it." Even though job operations had changed, workers ran production at the old rates and made sure that new workers did too. In order to beef up their ability to control workers' time and productivity, the company offered to buy the incentive system from the union for an increase in wages of 10 cents per hour. Without access to company books, it is impossible to determine the fairness of this offer. But in my own case it meant a loss of $20 to $50 per week in incentive pay.

In exchange, the company gained the right to revise, add, or eliminate "any job classifications" warranted by new conditions, "including but not limited to changes in methods, equipment, speeds and feeds, material, new equipment, processes or techniques." Although no one supported the company's right to "evaluate" jobs in this manner, there were mixed feelings about the sale of the incentive system. In a referendum election held during the strike, assembly workers voted against selling the incentive system while the majority of machine-shop workers supported the sale. The women in assembly felt they could "beat" any incentive system while many machine-shop workers stated that there "was too much partiality and favoritism involved with the distribution of incentive work." Under the system at Electric Inc. the group leaders, who were union members in managerial positions at the production level, had the authority to assign incentive work. Intentionally or not, incentive work could be used to intimidate or harass...
workers who had lost favor with the group leader. Often it caused arguments among workers in a department, especially if it was not rotated so that everyone got a chance to “make some money.” Although machine-shop workers endorsed the sale of the incentive system, they did not support the company’s Job Evaluation scheme. Just about everyone saw that for what it was.

During the 1974 strike, the Metal Workers surpassed even their 1971 performance. They asked the more militant workers to betray the rank and file and promote the union’s proposals. The negotiating team worked behind closed doors and maintained an informational screen. In fact, at the union meeting ostensibly called to discuss the contract, Oscar Mucker said he would throw out anyone who asked questions. One woman then asked about the sagacity of selling the incentive system for a dime, and was thrown out. During this meeting, workers began to circulate a petition calling for the dismissal of Oscar Mucker. Over 100 workers signed it, even though success would have left them without a liaison between the International and the local in the middle of a strike. Just before the balloting began, members of the union negotiating team stood before the rank and file and repeated company threats to close the shop if the contract was not ratified. Faced with this mess, workers agreed to go back to work, but only after the company agreed to a two-year contract and promised that Job Evaluation would not mean speed-up.

**BYPASSING THE UNION**

Workers at Electric Inc. have defended themselves against company-union collusion and irresponsible trade-union practices by relying only on themselves and the network of friendships they developed. The actions they have taken range from simply demanding on the spot that a dull and therefore hazardous shattering tool be sharpened, to secretly writing a letter to OSHA begging Federal inspectors to take action on a malfunctioning punch press that had already cost several fingers. Some have organized to throw out the old union officials or to throw out the union altogether and replace it with the UE. Many workers have heard from friends and relatives that the UE is a stronger and fairer union than the Metal Workers. While incumbent officers have been replaced, it is much harder to replace the union itself because of NLRB regulations that bar such an action except during the last 30 days of the contract.

These and other actions against the company have been carried out by an informal resistance network of workers, headed by a middle-aged woman who operates a turret lathe in the machine shop. Whatever the grievance, workers go first to the union; and if they fail to get results, which is usually the case, they next see Esther Szabo. Although she claims to “have a poor memory,” she knows three-fourth of the workers by their first names.

Esther Szabo began to work at Electric Inc. in 1966. Since turning 17,
she had worked in small, non-union shops in Cleveland and Lakeside. When she came to Electric Inc., she expected to earn higher wages and to find relaxed working conditions similar to those she had known in her former jobs. From her brother and brother-in-law she had heard that Electric Inc. “was a nice place to work,” a rumor contradicted by the fact that “they were always hiring.” She recalled that the two most frequently heard comments about the union were “they just take your money” and “they never do anything.”

An early confrontation with the Metal Workers involved the rescheduling of union meetings. In 1966 the union held its monthly meeting at the City Hall on Tuesday evening, making it impossible for second-shift workers to attend. When Esther Szabo suggested that the meetings be held on Sunday afternoons instead, other workers supported her, and the union president rescheduled the meetings. But attendance, usually confined to stewards and officers, did not improve. A few meetings convinced Esther that exasperation with the union, not apathy, accounted for the lack of rank-and-file participation.

A detached observer would probably have found those union meetings entertaining. Minutes were improperly recorded and gave little if any indication of what had transpired. Formality and Robert’s Rules were invoked only to cut off a disgruntled speaker or a discussion in which real grievances were expressed. Officers used three-fourths of the meeting time to wade through administrative material. Meetings ended with a sigh of relief, a salute to the stamina of those who had endured the entire two hours. Esther Szabo remained silent when the Tuesday-evening meeting time was restored.

Less than a year after winning this hollow victory, she began a campaign to have a pay phone installed in the shop cafeteria. The seriousness of having no convenient means with which to communicate with the outside world was underscored when a second-shift worker was stranded at the plant because her car would not start. The woman had to walk half a mile to Town at 2:30 A.M. to telephone for help. The women workers were especially concerned. They feared being stranded, and they also wanted to be able to “call home during breaks and lunch times to check if everything was okay with their children.” After this incident, Esther Szabo went to Waltz, the union president, and requested that a phone be installed for the workers. “Waltz wasn’t interested,” so she went to a foreman, but he too “wasn’t interested.” Finally Esther Szabo wrote a petition demanding that the company install a public phone, and “everyone signed it.” After taking it around to second-shift workers during breaks and lunchtime, she came in early the next day to ask first-shift workers to sign also. Pressure from below forced the union to take up the issue, and the workers got a phone. Two months later the same procedure was used to get a dollar changer in the cafeteria.

In 1970, when the company ordered foremen to stop workers from...
practicing their usual routine of quitting five minutes before the end of the shift to wash their hands, workers went to Esther Szabo. They had just assumed their right to wash off company dirt on company time, even though the union contract did not mention it. As far as the union officers were concerned, this attempt to alter established routine was outside the union’s jurisdiction because “nothing was said about it in the contract.” At the request of fellow workers, Esther launched a harassment and intimidation campaign against Waltz, the perennial union president. She took every opportunity to convince him that they “deserved” the five minutes to clean up. She argued that the company had no right to change established work practices unilaterally. To silence this woman, Waltz agreed to do what he could. Meanwhile, workers supported Esther Szabo’s actions by continuing to quit five minutes early. In the face of such strong resistance, Waltz had to go to the company and tell them their plan would not go down with the workers. And the company backed down.

In March 1974, just one month before the union contract expired, the Metal Workers supported a company plan to fire several workers who had accumulated many years of seniority. “There was a rumor going around the shop that the company had made a list of twenty workers who were too slow and they were going to fire them.” Furthermore, it was rumored that Bill Stewart, a handicapped worker with five years in the milling department, was at the top of the list. Although Stewart filed a grievance, the union hierarchy ruled there was “no case” and his grievance never went to arbitration. From the union, Stewart went to Esther Szabo, who was both fellow worker and neighbor.

As word got around the shop, a variety of responses contributed to a general sense of outrage. In addition to a genuine concern for Stewart’s welfare, there was anger, because the company’s plan defied established seniority policies, and fear, because no one knew for sure they weren’t “next on the list.” After discussing the problem informally with several trusted friends, Esther Szabo started a petition supporting Stewart’s right to his job. She explained that “people signed it because they weren’t sure if they were on the list, and they realized that even if they weren’t on this list, they had to stop this sort of company heavy-handedness or they could be next on some future list.” Strong opposition defeated the company once again, and no one was fired. Workers interpreted the company’s action on two levels. Taken at face value, it was an understandable, though unacceptable, plan “to get rid of the deadheads.” More disturbing, however, it was a way of testing workers’ reactions to unilateral changes in work regulations, especially those affecting productivity. Rumors about the company’s Job Evaluation Plan were already widespread, and workers thought this incident substantiated them.

Informal resistance networks at Electric Inc. are not exclusively crisis-oriented. In every department, workers restrict production, collectively or
individually, while co-workers “look the other way,” becoming accomplices in an ongoing assault on the clock. Tools disappear or inexplicably break. Machines “act up” or stop functioning altogether. Sympathetic set-up operators “take their time” preparing machines for new assignments. Job orders “disappear” or become so illegible that office copies have to be consulted. In the traffic of shift changes and interdepartmental flow, barrels, boxes, and trays of parts and materials simply “get lost.” Ignoring the protests and threats of foremen, time-study men, and group leaders, workers cooperate to stint the work, inadvertently asserting their right to control production.

Until recently, workers also cooperated on a daily basis “to beat the incentive system,” now replaced by Job Evaluation. The fact that the company wanted to abandon the incentive system is an indication of how successful the workers had been. Under the old system, as the union contract expressed it, time-study men used “MTM, time study, standard data, or other recognized tools of industrial engineering” to assign jobs a parts-per-hour rate. Workers were expected “to make” these rates, and were paid incentives of 1 percent above the base rate “for each percent of production increase above the normal rate.” Since the company reserved the right to retime any job consistently run over 150 percent of the “normal rate,” workers seldom produced more.

Workers modified most jobs to slow the pace, taking the risk that the company would “catch on” and order the rate men to retime the job. If there was no “better way” to do the job, workers could either forego quality or falsify documents on which they recorded daily totals. According to Esther Szabo many workers think they “can’t gain anything” by doing their best, so “they cover themselves” by finding “happy mediums” of production, somewhere between their “good days” and “bad days” output. She explained that “most people feel they should produce something” but they are careful not to exceed “their bad days’ production” by too much, lest the company demand it all the time. Another tactic was to complain formally about “unreasonable rates” to anyone who would listen, while informally cooperating with others to stint production below the set rate. In 1974 this practice was becoming increasingly widespread in response to the company’s systematic effort to reevaluate jobs and assign new rates.

When production could not be stinted, nor the rate “made,” workers not on piecework assisted those who were, “to make it.” Finding opportunities to do this depended largely upon the department’s structure. It was easiest for women in assembly where workers on piecework labored alongside those on straight time at narrow wooden benches. Machine operators, on the other hand, standing alone at individual machines, had a more difficult time getting away from their non-rated tasks and assisting a worker on piecework at another machine. When the company began to crack down in 1974, it became even harder for machine-shop workers to practice mutual aid, and they were among the first workers in the shop to conclude that
incentive pay was no longer worth the time and effort it took to earn it. They did not, however, vote to replace incentive with Job Evaluation, the company’s latest scheme to increase productivity.

Fighting back through an informal network demands both awareness and participation from the majority of workers. Esther Szabo explained her activities by saying that she “wants to help people,” as long as “the problem is legitimate.” She doesn’t “fight lost causes.” People come to her because she has spoken out in the past and continued to fight for a justice that she doesn’t articulate. She “starts something” and expects people to back her up with whatever it takes to win. Petitions have been effective, and they are not taken lightly. To sign a piece of paper that could “get lost” as it travels through the shop, eventually falling into company hands, is a very serious and risky business. Protective labor legislation still leaves the company plenty of room to find grounds for dismissing a worker.

One pay phone, a dollar changer, and a Sunday union meeting, five minutes to wash up, a two-year contract, and stinting production cannot be construed into an impressive list of victories. The realities of the wage system, with its long hours, low wages, hazardous working conditions, speed-up, monotony, meaningless work, and squandered talent, continue to diminish the workers at Electric Inc. Yet these realities should not obscure the lesson of their resistance. The informal network reasserts the very lines of confrontation that the union has obscured through its cooperative relationship with the company. Informal resistance has done more to threaten the authority of the boss than has the institutionalized negotiating of the Metal Workers. Because the network is called forth, not by a “contract,” but rather by an unarticulated understanding of what is fair play in the context of an adverserial relationship with the boss, their actions have gone beyond legality. It is in this ability to transcend the formal constraints of both the union and the company that one sees the roots of even greater challenges to the boss.

THE SOCIAL NETWORK

Clarence Long understood how socializing with his employees could mitigate the resentment he incurred for paying low wages and expecting long hours and maximum output. According to him, “workers should be made to feel important. Even the lowest-paid worker is a human being.” For their own reasons, workers at Electric Inc. have formed an elaborate social network which operates both inside and outside the shop. This social network is the backbone of their informal resistance, as well as a means to counteract the numbing effects of tending machines and assembling parts eight or more hours a day, five days a week, fifty weeks a year for a lifetime.

In the many opportunities workers find to interact outside the shop, people become friends and, occasionally, lovers. Men, and an increasing number of women, frequently socialize over a glass of beer at the local
working-class taverns before, during, or after work. Second-shift workers regularly begin their weekend on Friday night by meeting spouses and friends from other factories at a favorite bar. More formally organized parties occur at workers' houses on Saturday evenings. At these get-togethers men and women from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds drink, talk, sing, and dance. While most workers enjoy singing and listening to the country and western music that can be heard even in the factory, they tolerate the more modern stuff generally favored and occasionally performed by younger workers.

There are also camping trips and shopping sprees, Sunday dinners shared with friends and relatives, and weekday visits to people's homes for coffee, conversation, counseling, and moral support. Fellow workers act as surrogate analysts, marriage counselors, child specialists, educators, and other professional people who are too expensive or too removed by the lines of class to be consulted directly. On a lighter scale there are occasions to bake bread, distribute surplus garden produce, exchange old clothes, especially those of children, swap mechanical and other expertise, and "just plain help out."

Since the amount of time spent in these off-the-job encounters and activities is limited by the 40-to-60-hour work week, socializing continues on the job. Workers in assembly, for example, try to arrange their jobs so that they can talk, control the pace of work, assist other workers, and restrict production. Often workers make something special out of their lunch breaks, either by organizing a pot-luck shop dinner or, during the summer months, by picnicking behind the factory. The company has tried to institutionalize this practice, and has offered to build a "picnic area" near the shop.

During working hours, people take time to discuss families, homes, news events, politics, working conditions, and themselves. These discussions have a built-in momentum, grounded in the need to humanize the workplace and punctuated by the whistles of the shift. They offer a chance to regain some control over the time already forfeited to the boss.

In these discussions workers find strength and support to make small but important adjustments in their lives. Faith left a husband who beat her. Dorothy took a job on first shift so that she could spend more time with her husband and children. Others began to fight for improved safety conditions. Still others discovered in these conversations the courage to resist endless assaults by group leaders who tell them to work faster, or foremen who keep track of how many times they go to the bathroom, or personnel managers who order them to come to work 15 minutes early without pay.

The effects of these social encounters are evident throughout the shop. Young countercultural women, for example, introduced the older women workers to the latest information about vitamins, health foods, wholesome living, primal scream therapy, yoga, and human sexuality. As one woman explained, the older women "got hooked." They began to fix their hair
differently. Some of them donned blue jeans for the first time. Everywhere, women could be heard talking about how good they felt now that they were eating better, doing exercises, and taking vitamins. As a few women shared their personal experiences, other people seemed to open up, joining in discussions which occasionally centered on supposedly “private matters” such as abortion, birth control, “free” relationships, and family troubles. In this two-way exchange of information older workers taught their younger counterparts how to restrict production. These workers also had much to share about shop etiquette, survival, and “the good old days,” when management seemed less intrusive.

Interacting in yet another way, a few people formed study groups to read and discuss Jack London’s *The Iron Heel*, John Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle*, Studs Terkel’s *Hard Times*, and Alix Kates Shulman’s *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*. More popular reading material includes farming magazines and “futures” farm reports, *Popular Mechanics*, astrology magazines, and do-it-yourself engineering and electrical publications. This, like all reading material, is prohibited in the shop. Of course people ignore this rule. Miscellaneous reading material I passed around the shop and discussed with friends included articles in *Economic Notes* and *Monthly Review*, War Resisters League literature, and David Montgomery’s “What’s Happening to the American Worker?” Often these pieces pertained to a particular shop discussion, issue, or argument.

Apparently sensitized through some heated discussions about women’s rights on the job, in December 1973 men in the second-shift automatics department walked off their jobs when they learned that the company had denied Muriel Pawlowski’s bid for a job in their department. Their understanding of her rights had been shaped for the most part by what they saw on television and experienced in the shop. From this introduction to sexual politics, they determined that an equal right to a job for which a woman was qualified was “women’s liberation and it was okay.” Within an hour after the men walked into the personnel manager’s office to protest the company’s decision, Muriel was awarded the bid. To date only the maintenance and tool-and-die departments are all-male.

In addition to the interactions of small groups of workers, there are also social encounters which involve the entire shop. For second-shift workers the most common of these are birthday celebrations and going-away parties. Preparations for the latter begin about a week in advance of the worker’s last day. Food lists circulate around the shop during working hours, and workers sign up to bring a dish or some other necessary item. Usually the women prepare something at home and with few exceptions, each man contributes a dollar towards a ham or roast. George Binns, a tool-and-die-maker keeps an electric frying pan in the tool room just to prepare special dishes for such occasions. On the night of the party, workers drop off their contributions in the assembly department, where half a dozen women “get things ready.”
When the eight-o’clock whistle blows, 80 workers line-up behind the guest of honor and the feast begins, resulting in a festive scene carried out at a pace that would have delighted Frederick Winslow Taylor.

When the 8:30 whistle signals the end of the dinner break, people mosey back to their departments and resume work. Foremen make a habit of leaving assembly a few minutes before 8:30 to avoid confrontations with those workers who linger past the last whistle. Women in assembly clean up the mess on company time, and everyone returns at the ten-o’clock break to finish the leftovers and to have cake and coffee. Birthday celebrations follow a similar pattern, but usually on a smaller scale unless the person being honored is especially well known and liked.

Though the factory continues to be an inhospitable place over which workers have very little control, they have not deferred completely either to the noise and grime or to the boss. Interacting on and off the job they have instead integrated their personal and political lives to form a resistance network that extends from shop to home. Within this unrecognized and unofficial structure, workers at Electric Inc. have personalized their battles with the boss and politicized their personal struggles with themselves and with each other, often just trying to get through another working day.

THE CONGLOMERATE ERA

As the economy began to wind down in 1974, the company began to crack down. Tightened discipline strained the resources of the informal resistance network because “it was becoming more difficult to get to the bathroom to pee,” let alone to discuss problems in the shop. Esther Szabo explained that the network had been most effective when working conditions remained sufficiently relaxed to give workers an opportunity “to meet in the restrooms” or to gather around their machines to discuss problems, make plans, and sign petitions. By 1975, only one shift with a skeleton crew of fewer than 100 workers operated the shop. When workers realized that these lay-offs undermined their ability to affect shop conditions, they decided to take over the union. Although Esther Szabo had often been asked to run for union office, she refused until 1976, when cutbacks had defeated the informal network approach, and the other “right people,” workers who had also exercised informal leadership, stepped forward to run with her. In the election, the largest turnout in shop history defeated incumbent officers, including those who had held office since 1963. Of the 200 workers eligible to vote, 144 cast ballots, while the union officers denied another 200 workers the right to vote because they were laid off. Esther Szabo lost the presidency by two votes to the candidate she supported, winning instead the office of corresponding secretary, where she feels she can most effectively use her skills. This latest turn of events belongs to the conglomerate era, and it needs to be connected to the relevant changes in management practices at Electric Inc.
Beneath the Surface

Dynamo Inc. purchased Electric in April 1967 for an undisclosed amount of cash. Although Dynamo had been incorporated only in 1960, by 1967 it was one of the “major growth companies in the world.” As a conglomerate engaged in “research and manufacturing of electronic systems, components and controls, tool and die steels, aircraft and guided missile systems, material technology, geophysics, and oceanography . . .,” Dynamo received government contracts, exceeding 70 million dollars in 1972. Between 1960 and 1973, when their military contracts began to decline, Dynamo acquired controlling interest in hundreds of small businesses, including insurance and finance companies, and purchased others outright, as was the case with Electric Inc. Prior to 1973, the management of the Dynamo conglomerate showed little interest in Electric Inc. But without the guaranteed profits from government contracts and war production, Dynamo was forced to pay more attention to its non-military sector. To achieve a competitive market position with factories such as Electric Inc., Dynamo introduced new managerial policies and made structural changes in the production process.

To everyone’s surprise, Dynamo fired the old Electric Inc. managers. Young men who had gotten their managerial training in slick, gigantic, “growth” companies where the workforce was organized by “big labor” unions such as the United Auto Workers, Steel Workers, or Machinists replaced them. Even Lawrence Dunlitz got the ax. At the bottom, Dynamo managers launched an efficiency drive aimed at increasing productivity. Evidence of this could be seen in the institutionalization of foremen/worker relations, the replacement of incentive by Job Evaluation, and an unprecedented concern for absenteeism, “goofing off,” and the volume of scrap metal being produced.

Along with structural changes, Dynamo introduced the latest fashion in paternalism. Its theme was the familiar one of “one big happy family,” but the family had become a “TEAM.” In a July 18, 1974, letter to “fellow employees,” Richard Kraft, president of Dynamo Electric Inc., exposed the company’s new approach to worker/management relations. He wrote:

Dear Fellow Employees,

One of my first objectives as your new President is to try to create for each of you the feeling that your job at Dynamo Electric is the best, most challenging and most exciting you have ever had. To accomplish this, we are working hard to improve conditions, to supply the needed tools and to further develop the friendly, businesslike atmosphere of the Company.

A Team Effort—all of us working together—is required to accomplish the job we have to do. There are many things we in management work on which we think are good ideas, or we feel you think are good ideas, but I would like to have a better feel of what is on your mind. For this purpose, I am having a personal mailbox placed in the cafeterias where you can write
Workers realized that Kraft was trying to take advantage of their experience and expertise without undermining basic assumptions about the role of workers and the distribution of power in the factory. To a lesser extent, so had Clarence Long, and though both men employed paternalism, there were important differences. In contrast to Long's owner-operator paternalism, in which he recognized workers as individual farmers or housewives with special needs to be given special consideration, Dynamo introduced a paternalism in which workers are treated as fools who can be manipulated with the proper mixture of psychology, intimidation, and style. Beneath management's new suit of understanding, consideration, confidence, and good-will, workers detect the odor of dirty underwear.

One feature of the new paternalism has been the creation of a recreation fund to promote sports teams and annual company-worker picnics. Kraft explained that "during working hours we work hard to produce quality products at the lowest possible cost. When the working day is over, we deserve some recreation!" Additional efforts to personalize the factory experience have included open-house parties for the workers and their families, a plant beautification program, a President's Suggestion Box that workers stuff with complaints, and a shop newspaper that has issued some very entertaining blurbs from the "President's Corner." Inspired by the 1975 Christmas season, Kraft composed a commentary on "Electric Inc. Spirit," that "esprit de corps, others might think of—as dedication to a common goal or perhaps pride in accomplishment."

He claimed to "see it in the eyes of the people as" he walked "through the plant in the morning." Wherever he looked he saw "pride on the faces and a joy in the eyes of everyone..." Thinking it was "a matter of pride in the work being done and the knowledge that important work is being accomplished with skill and craftsmanship," he declared how "proud and grateful" he was "to be part of this... family and to be swept up in this spirit," emanating from this "truly... great place to work." No one need take but one walk through this shop to conclude that Kraft perceived things incorrectly.

As an instructor, he fared no better. In another message, for example, Kraft revealed how workers could help "underprice our competition." He implored each worker to ask:

Is my machine producing good parts every minute that it could during the day, or are there times when it could be producing more? Am I getting the most production out of my equipment? Am I using my time wisely or is there wasted motion? Are there some additional few minutes during every hour that I could use more productively?
Equally concerned about waste, he suggested that workers ask themselves two more simple questions: “Are we wasting material? and, Are we wasting time?”

Workers, according to Esther Szabo, realize that Kraft is wasting his time. They have ignored his lesson, and in general, “are suspicious of the new treatment.” “They think it probably foreshadows something bad.” The new paternalism has produced “lots of uneasiness,” and helped to generate “lots of rumors in the plant” as to what all this means. Workers have also acted through the union to counter the company’s new approach to industrial management. According to Esther, “We’re trying to do something from here [the union], just like we did something from inside the shop. If we’re not successful, we’ll try something else.”