I work at the Fleetwood Fisher Body plant in Detroit. A lot of you have probably seen or heard of it—it's that big old factory over on Fort St. where we make bodies for Cadillacs.

I want to talk to you today about what it's like to work at Fleetwood. But instead of describing my individual experience at Fleetwood, I want to try something a lot more ambitious: I want to analyze the collective experience of all the workers at Fleetwood. But this is not just analysis for the sake of analysis. I want to use my analysis of Fleetwood to uncover ways in which not only myself but a lot of workers can assume more control over our working lives.

Let me outline my argument so that you can see what I'm driving at:

In terms of economics, the main struggle going on at Fleetwood is between the workers and management over the amount of labor that will go into the Cadillacs. In terms of politics, the main struggle is between two groups of workers who are competing with each other over how that struggle with management will be carried out. One group of workers (who are usually but not always old) are trying to force management to bargain more equitably around a labor/money exchange which is itself not fundamentally questioned by these workers. The other group of workers (who are usually
but not always young) have yet to accept the validity of that labor/money exchange and are in constant rebellion against it.

I call this struggle political for the simple reason that many of the participants in it are quite aware of what's going on. The workers are constantly thinking about the economic necessity and the structure of authority that forces them into the plant in the first place. And they are constantly trying to figure out what to do about it.

The struggle between these two groups of workers gives rise to what I'll call an advanced set of political issues and a conservative set of political issues, both of which are expressed quite clearly in the plant. On the basis of the advanced issues, some workers are questioning the very nature of their role as producer in the society. On the basis of the conservative issues, other workers are trying to use their role as producer as leverage to get what they can get.

My goal today is not just to analyze these political currents in the plant. I want also to analyze as precisely as I can the theoretical and organizational dilemmas which confront people who are pursuing the advanced issues. And I want to analyze ways in which these dilemmas can be broken down.

So now I want to begin my description of shopfloor politics at Fleetwood:

The first thing I have to point out, unfortunately, is that competition forms the initial basis for all our social interaction in the plant. This is true by definition: we're at Fleetwood to sell our labor, and so we compete in a tight market with others who have the same commodity to sell. We compete primarily with people outside the plant who are looking for work. But we also compete with other workers in ways which have great impact on the terms of our employment. Some jobs are better than others. Some pay more than others. A lot of times we need favors from the foremen, so we compete with each other over them. For instance, it's always easier for some people than others to get a pass to go home early.

It's important to start with this notion of competition because this provides the framework within which all our other collective efforts must develop. Strictly speaking, our collective identity is not one that's defined by unity and common interests. Our collective identity is defined by disunity and competing interests.

I'm glad to say that competition doesn't form the totality of our interactions in the plant. There's cooperation inherent in any mass industrial enterprise (although as it stands now this cooperation is advantageous mainly to the management). But outside of the work itself, groups of workers do associate on the basis of coherent group identities. And strong individual friendships do emerge among a lot of people.

Now in a situation as complex as Fleetwood, you have a lot of different groups doing a lot of different things. When I talk about how advanced and conservative issues arise in the plant, I'm obviously referring to what people
do and think in relation to their work itself. Work at Fleetwood has a certain homogeneous character—it's an assembly plant. And so there are a certain range of possibilities of what people can think and do about their work.

My main goal today is to demonstrate to you the existence of a group of workers who I will call the vanguard group. I define the vanguard group in this way: they are a coherent group of people who are consistently trying to push through on the most advanced possibilities and most advanced political issues in the plant. I want to make it clear that this vanguard defines itself by what it does, by its own practice in the plant. They're not fulfilling some prophecy that was laid down a couple hundred years ago.

Now what are the advanced issues that the vanguard group attempts to act on? I define those issues in this way: the vanguard group is composed of those people in the plant who resist the reduction of their needs, personalities, and individualities to fit the needs of assembly line discipline. The vanguard group is composed of those people who refuse to think of themselves as only auto workers, who refuse to act as if they are mere appendages to this giant mechanical monster.

But I have to give you some facts so that you have a better idea of what I'm talking about. Let me say first that 20 percent of the workforce belong to this vanguard group. Not all the people in the plant are trying to resist assembly line discipline. Here are six other coherent groups who identify themselves by their practice in the plant:

1. There are a lot of old people in the plant who are just hanging on until they retire.
2. There are a lot of recent immigrants who are still pretty confused by their new environment.
3. There are a lot of people who lack self-confidence to such an extent that they actually need the identity which is supplied for them by the line.
4. There are a lot of small businessmen who are delighted to have a captive audience on which to operate: you've got all kinds of loan sharks, dope peddlers, numbers men, and so on.
5. There are a lot of brown-nosers who openly collaborate with the foremen to such an extent that they actually benefit from the structure of authority.
6. And there are a great mass of people who are dissatisfied with their work environment but who are not actively trying to change it: their main goal during the working day is to just "get by."

So here are six groups of workers whose practice in the plant can be called conservative. I want to return later on to describe these conservative workers in more detail. I'm just pointing them out here to give a better idea of who the vanguard workers are.

But now I want to make some descriptive generalizations about the
people in the vanguard group. Within the group, blacks and whites are equally represented and there are a small number of women between the ages of 25 and 32. The people might have come from other areas of the country, but they are now comfortable within a complex urban environment. A lot of them have fought in Vietnam. Most have families. Most have high school diplomas. And some have taken courses at local colleges.

But as I said before, a vanguard defines itself by what it does, and in order to fully describe what I mean by vanguard, I have to describe what these people do to actively resist factory discipline. In order to do this, I want to focus for a few minutes on one section in the plant, the Kotan section. This is generally believed to be the most militant section in the plant.

The most obvious activity of the vanguard group in the Kotan section is that they lead the yearly slowdown over manning levels in the department.

The Kotan job is a unique job at Fleetwood in that it requires a lot of skill on the part of the workers. Their job is to install the vinyl tops. They have to place the top on the car, stretch it to get all the wrinkles out, cut it to precise length and so on. All of this can take 20 minutes or more, and so they have about 40 teams of two people each working in rotation while the line is moving. That means there's a lot of people working on the job—with reliefmen and extras the total comes to about 110. This is another unique aspect of the Kotan job: there's so many of them that when they act in unison they have a lot of power.

Every year there's a model change at Fleetwood, and every year work is added to the Kotan job and workers are eliminated. So every year the Kotan people take the job in the hole. This is a fairly common event at Fleetwood. But when the Kotan people do it it's extraordinary. They don't just take the job in the hole 50 or 60 feet. They take it down 500 or 600 feet. And they cause a lot of disruption.

But I want to focus on the activity of the vanguard group in this struggle. First of all, they are the ones who initiate the slowdown and who articulate the demands. There are always a lot of rumors and threats that fly around before the slowdown begins. The foremen go around and say that everyone will be fired or that the corporation is so sick of having trouble at Fleetwood that they want to shut it down entirely. The union comes around and says the slowdown won't be necessary since progress is being made in the negotiations. A lot of workers will be swayed by these rumours, since they're hoping to avoid a drawn-out struggle anyway.

So it's up to the vanguard to take the lead. They have to say first of all that it's not impossible for workers to take the company on and win. They have to say also that it's not impossible for workers to act as a group. And they have to say that it's only on the basis of pressure from the shop floor that the union will be able to do anything in the negotiations anyway. So off they go down into the hole.
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Most workers in the Kotan section would never initiate the slowdown. But they will follow the lead of the vanguards. There are plenty of brown-nosers who don't want to go along. And so it's up to the vanguards to convince them, something which might require physical harassment. There are certain forms of sabotage which can go along with the slowdown. And the vanguards have to keep a close eye on the union, to see what kind of deals are being made.

But another responsibility of the vanguards is to keep the slowdown going once it's begun. The battle often lasts for weeks, and the pressure is intense. The vanguards have to keep people's spirits up, to see that they avoid unnecessary mistakes and so on. Once a speed-up grievance has been filed by the union, it's impossible for the company to discipline people for simply being in the hole. But they can throw people out for mistakes of workmanship or for coming back late from break. The company is clearly most interested in nailing the vanguards for this kind of thing; sometimes they just make up lies about what a certain person did. And so from the first day of the slowdown, the company begins throwing people out into the street. One of the most thrilling things for me as I watch this is to see new leaders step forward as the old ones get thrown out.

But the most exciting thing about the slowdowns is that you can actually see workers winning victories. This happened in 1976. The battle lasted for weeks, and more and more people were thrown out. But finally, on a certain Friday night, the company couldn't replace all the people they had thrown out and still cover for normal Friday night absenteeism. That meant they had to let one out of six cars go down the line without a vinyl top. The repair costs were staggering, and so on that night the company gave in. Manning levels were increased in the department and everyone who had been thrown out was brought back with full pay.

Now this was only a short-term victory in the sense that several months later the company cut back on the manning levels, and because the whole battle began again with the next model change. But through the year, the vanguards had preserved the camaraderie that had developed during the slowdown. And so when the next battle came, they were ready. How did these workers preserve their identities through the year?

One of the big prizes the Kotan people get by winning these slowdowns is that they get a little extra time between their jobs. They tend to congregate then in coherent groups in specific areas on the department. The identities of the groups are defined mainly by what people do in relation to factory discipline. The old men huddle along the line between the stock area and the area where the glue is sprayed on. The brown-nosers hang out over by the foremen's desk. The bible readers hang out in the back, where they discuss philosophy and stuff. There are a group of black moderates and a group of white moderates who hang out at the picnic tables by the foremen's desk. And the black and the white vanguards hang out over by the windows.
The main thing that goes on over by the windows is that people are self-conscious about maintaining the community and the camaraderie which was formed during the slowdowns. If the slowdowns were just sporadic events, maybe participation in them wouldn’t be sufficient to justify calling a certain group vanguard. But if the slowdowns happen every year, if the same people lead them, and if those people try to preserve their community year in and year out, then the concept of vanguard becomes much deeper. But what are the daily sort of events which keep the community going?

In the first place, there’s always some sort of specifically collective event going on by the windows. Maybe it’s a group dinner a few guys are preparing. Maybe people are collectively reading and discussing the newspaper. Maybe they’re getting together a softball game or a picnic outside the plant. And people are always just standing around and talking. There’s an information network for militants that extends throughout the plant, and people are always discussing the latest rumor, the latest move by the union and so on. But they also talk about anything else that comes up: they might talk about religion, about marriage, about bringing up kids, about fixing up their houses, about keeping their cars running and so on. These are not superficial discussion. People talk about their values, their beliefs, their fundamental perceptions of the universe in which they find themselves.

The funniest thing that goes on by the windows is that there’s a constant rowdiness back there. People are always up to something. The big thing last fall was pitching quarters. It was initiated by some of the white vanguards, and pretty soon the games grew into big events—people would gather around and cheer and so on. Eventually the foreman came over and told people to stop, and then it became a game of hide and seek—people would sneak in a few games while the foreman wasn’t looking. Pretty soon some of the black vanguards started playing, then some of the white moderates. Pretty soon people all over the department were playing, partly for the fun of it and partly for the joy of outfoxing the foreman. The game even caught on in the back corner where I work, but only after it had died down in the Kotan area.

After the pitching quarters game faded out, the new game became basketball. People would carve hoops out of packing material and shape balls out of tape and cardboard. And then they’d have really dynamite games of two on two or three on three. This lasted for a couple weeks, and then the foreman started tearing down the hoops.

The big event at Christmas (besides the party) was that the whole group participated in making a Christmas tree. They cut the tree out of some cardboard, stapled it to some wood from a packing crate, and then painted and decorated it with anything they could find in the plant. It was really elaborate. It was eight feet tall; it had Christmas balls and candy canes on it; it even had a chimney with stockings and logs burning in the fireplace. It was a work of art. But then, lo and behold, the foreman came and tore down the
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tree. It wasn't that there was anything so destructive about the tree. It's just that the foreman had been trying all year to break the identity of that group—these were the same people who lead the slowdowns. I should say for the record that the general foreman later ordered the foreman to put the tree back up. But it didn't matter much then. The Christmas spirit had been ruined.

Now this, I think, constitutes a good description of the vanguard group in Kotan. But Kotan is a unique section: it's unique in ways which make the vanguard activity much easier to see. But there are a lot of vanguard people in the plant who are isolated, and so what they do is much harder to see. How do these vanguard people express themselves in isolation?

Well I'm going to take myself as an example of this. I work in the back, about 50 yards from the Kotan area. It's a pretty quiet corner. The group interaction is nowhere near as intense as in Kotan. And most of the people are committed to what I'll describe later as conservative courses of action.

The job I do is also different from Kotan in that there's no skill involved: I don't do any one coherent operation. I do a lot of different things on each job. This is the typical kind of job we have at Fleetwood.

On the Eldorados I have to shoot a retainer inside the quarter glass window. A retainer is a short strip of metal: I'm not sure what its purpose is. On the Sedans and Broughams I have to shoot a bumper inside the front door. A bumper is this small piece of plastic that goes "bump" when you close the door. And on these cars and the Coupes and the Sevilles I have to put masking tape on the surfaces near where the vinyl top will go. My tape is to prevent glue from getting all over when they spray the cars before installing the vinyl tops. I put yards and yards of masking tape on each car. The tape has to be in precise position and it has to be slicked down.

There's nothing hard about the individual components of the job. My work is light and fast. It might take several weeks to learn to coordinate the various tasks. And it might take months to get really good. But eventually the main problem is time: you have to come to grips with the necessity of actually having to do that shit. You have to come up with some way of making sure your identity doesn't get destroyed by your work.

The main way I try to do this is to minimize the thought and labor which are required to do the job. I don't have to think too much about what I do: I just start running and let the momentum carry me. But I have to be careful not to get into a bad mood, not to let my morale slip, not to be aware of the passage of time. As far as the work goes, I'm always cutting little corners, finding little shortcuts. I don't want to describe too much of this publicly since they might start watching me, but let me say that most people at Fleetwood are surprised at how many shortcuts you can take and still not get caught. I want to be clear here that I'm not the only worker playing this game: almost everybody does it. The assembly line gives very little incentive to do otherwise. And I should say also that the foremen and the general
foremen and the superintendents and the plant managers are also playing the game: they’re all trying to see what they can put over on higher levels of management. If you think all this has an impact on the quality of the final product, you’re right. Poor quality is not an accident these days: it’s built into the very essence of the system.

But what do I do as an individual worker with the time I save by taking these shortcuts? I’m good enough at my job now that I can do two or three cars in a row fast and then have maybe 15 or 20 seconds for myself in between. The main thing I do with these interludes is read. I read the paper every day and I read books. Some of the books are quite complex. The main thing I’ve had to learn in order to read under these conditions is to remember what I’ve read and to be able to quickly find where I’ve left off. Reading is very important to me. It takes my mind somewhere else. I’m not the only one who reads; a lot of people do it, except that they might read magazines or do crossword puzzles; some people might knit or sew, but people can generally keep busy during the little gaps between their jobs.

And like most people, I do a lot of talking when I’m working. I talk to people next to me or to people who are passing through. And in the same way as a lot of people, I consciously try to circulate around the plant during my break time. There’s a whole network of these vanguard people who seek each other out and visit. The discussions are not always political. People are just trying to make the day go by a little faster. They’re trying to make the day more interesting.

Another major social event is at lunchtime. A lot of people go out to the bar across the street or they sit in their cars and talk. I go out every day. I usually have a beer or two. It’s a chance to relax a bit, to enjoy a change of scenery. Pretty soon there’s a coherent group of people in the plant who have come to know each other through their interactions in the parking lot.

Another major way that people resist the discipline of the factory is through absenteeism. Most people in the plant work every day, but that’s just because they need the money. There’s a certain percentage of people in the plant who aren’t so pressed for cash and so they don’t feel the need to come in every day. The company has been trying for years and years to get these people to come in, but there’s really not much the company can do about it.

Another major event which defines this vanguard group in the plant is the wildcat strike we had at Fleetwood in the summer of 1976. The shop committee of the local called the strike, but they got their signals crossed badly. So at the time of the walkout there was a lot of confusion as to who was going and why. A lot of people turned back or waited at the door to see what would happen. Six hundred people walked out, but it was only because they felt it was time for a walkout regardless of the union’s ability or inability to lead it. There were a lot of positive and negative consequences of the wildcat; some people got fired and all the rest. But one thing I do want to say
is that that group of 600 people survived the walkout relatively intact, and they have continued to participate heavily in the other kinds of vanguard activity I've been describing today (RA vol. 11, no. 5).

So this, I think, is a fair description of the vanguard activity in the plant: you have periodic slowdowns; a lot of day to day interactions which keep the militant community in the plant alive; a lot of people struggling in isolation to not let their identities be totally overwhelmed by their work; chronic absenteeism and occasional explosive events like a wildcat. People are always pushing, always moving, always looking for some kind of change. People are always thinking and talking, too. I want to ask now a very important question in trying to assess the political importance of this activity: I want to see what kind of consciousness is being expressed by what people are doing. What do people believe about themselves and society to make them act this way?

I think there are several generalizations which can be made about what these people think. The first thing to point out is that their shop floor militancy is from their own point of view a reflection on what they think of the entire society, not just what they think of Fleetwood. Their experience throughout society has taught them that they have to fight for anything they're going to get. A lot of them have fought in Viet Nam; both blacks and whites have had to contend with state authority in the streets and in the welfare office. If they perceive a bottleneck in the production process, if they perceive that a slowdown in Kotan can be a very powerful thing, then they're ready, willing and able to take advantage of it.

Another primary belief among this vanguard is that there is no equality of opportunity in the society and that they themselves are working far below their capacity. This is felt particularly among blacks. Most people talk about getting out of the plant. But few people ever make it.

It's a common belief among these people that basically you have to hustle just to survive at Fleetwood, that you have to work hard to maintain your morale and your self-image. This is the main purpose of the small groups that people are a part of on the shop floor. It's also the main purpose of the shop floor militancy itself.

These workers have long since given up any hope of satisfaction from their work. They try to have a good time with people around them. But they seek their main satisfaction at home. People have hobbies that they're into. And they have great hopes for their marriages and their relationships with their kids. But there's a lot of tension and hard work that go along with having a family. So for many people it seems like real satisfaction is more the exception than the rule.

These workers have some sense about how the work is affecting their health in the long run. They worry about stress, about drinking, about popping too many pills. But they have very few alternatives in the short run, so they figure, "What the hell can you do?"
These vanguard workers generally feel that Fleetwood is going downhill. The dominant outlook in the plant is that “all you can do is hang on and make as much money as you can before the bottom falls out.” People basically feel that you have to have twenty years in the plant now in order to have a decent shot at getting a full pension.

This perception of instability and decline contributes to a general cynicism about their own ability to act as a group. They understand correctly that they are powerful only insofar as they can impede production. And so they sense how they are undermined if they are based in a declining industry. This also dampens their enthusiasm for traditional liberal rhetoric about “Saving our Jobs.” People know intuitively that this has very little basis in political economy.

This is similar to the long range outlook of people in the Kotan area. People are convinced that eventually the company will eliminate the section, either by installing the tops automatically or by having two-tone painted tops and so on. The Kotan people don’t respond to this by staying out of the hole now. But they are not very hopeful about the future.

The best of these people, the real vanguard, are also very cynical about the general prospects for change in the society. They’ve already tried, through these slowdowns and things, to challenge portions of the power structure, and so they know how well entrenched it is. And they’re also very cynical about the ability of workers to act collectively. How can it be otherwise, when they’ve literally had to fight to organize something as seemingly fundamental as a slowdown in the department over speed-up?

What does this say about the possibility of broader actions?

This vanguard group at Fleetwood has been exposed to Socialist or Communist movements in this country for many years, and have a pretty sophisticated opinion of where the left is at. One guy put it to me this way: “Revolution is a nice idea. But it’s one of those things that you can talk all day about and never quite get anywhere.” People aren’t unsympathetic to the Left. It just doesn’t mean much to them.

Most people don’t think the union is any kind of long term solution to their problems. And they have little faith in what it can do in the short run. But they tend to defend the union from company attack. And they don’t like it when people attack the union when there’s nothing available by way of short-term alternatives.

Part of their lack of faith in the union is that they perceive it as tied to wage and benefit packages. They’ll take the money and the benefits. But they say quite clearly that these alone will never add up to a solution to their problems.

So in general, I’d sum up the outlook of this vanguard in this way: They’re extremely alienated from their role as producer in the society. They have an ability to organize to get what they can in the short run. They have a perception that long run change will require broad collective effort on the
part of the workers. And they're generally cynical about the prospects for these changes to come about.

So then, why are these vanguard groups important? I would say first that the collective identity of these vanguard groups is in essence the composite of many individual efforts to not let our individual identities get wiped out by the work we do. We take part in a collective identity which is entirely of our own making. We've already overcome the competition which lies at the bottom of initial interactions. We've rejected the notion that what we get from the society comes through exchanging our labor. What we get now comes through our own ability to organize and fight for it. In fact, we've organized now to fight for something which the company can't give us anyway, which is our dignity and integrity as human beings.

I think the activity of these vanguard groups is important also because it embodies a vivid condemnation of how society is organized today. In fact it's hard to imagine how any society could be organized such that the demands of these vanguard groups could be met. The activity of these groups, in fact, give me the best clues I've ever had as to what a truly revolutionary society would look like. These workers would never accept a society that called itself revolutionary if the unskilled workers were simply ordered to do arbitrary, repetitive labor. Any technologically advanced society is going to require a division of labor between mental and manual laborers. But these vanguard workers of today would never accept a division of labor in which they were not fully active, fully conscious participants in the decision-making process. If unskilled labor is required by a revolutionary society, it won't be arbitrarily imposed on the workers. They will have a lot to say about the terms and the conditions under which they will work.

But beyond that, the existence of these vanguard groups in the plant is important because it proves that people's identities can't be stamped out by this system of production. These vanguard groups make it possible to imagine conscious mass participation in a movement to change this society. And these vanguard groups throw out hope that a society characterized by conscious mass decision-making can indeed emerge.

But I don't want to get too carried away when I say this. I don't want to say that the revolution is occurring down at Fleetwood. In fact, these vanguard groups would be the first to say that they're not organized to achieve anything more than they've got, which is a slightly more humanized existence at Fleetwood.

And furthermore, people have a deep understanding of how dangerous the powers-that-be are. They're not about to take any chances, any more general steps unless the goals are pretty clear and unless they have some reasonable chance to succeed. It's like what a lot of people have discovered when they take their jobs down into the hole: it's a very unpleasant experience to have nine or ten foremen standing in your face.

And so fear, fear itself, is a very important part of the outlook of people
at Fleetwood. A lot of people look at what happened to John Kennedy or Martin Luther King and say, "If people like that can get killed, we don't stand a chance." People may not know who killed these men or why. And they may not be trying to analyze the dangers that would actually be faced by a movement of workers. But the subjective implications of this fear are still very important. People say, "The hell with it. I'll just get along as best as I can."

And people are still basically cynical about the ability of workers to act collectively as a group; this is the single most concrete expression of how people perceive their powerlessness today. They feel like even if they did create some worker organization to fight for their interests, pretty soon somebody from the rank and file would rise up and sell it out. Workers talk almost wistfully about how different it was 10 or 15 years ago, when things were different, when people did stick together. The union was a much bigger part of people's lives then, so I ask people if the union has changed. People shake their heads and say, "No, it's the people. The people have changed." Nobody can be more specific. People just lower their heads and walk away.

So even though the vanguard exists at Fleetwood, even though they're a very powerful force on the shop floor, I'd still have to call the atmosphere at Fleetwood a generally conservative one. I don't mean that people believe in George Wallace or anything like that. I just mean that people aren't into taking too many chances. They're apprehensive about the future, and they believe they'd be doing well to just maintain the life they've carved out for themselves at this point.

Now I want to describe more fully these conservative currents that run through the plant. I've spent all this time talking about the vanguard group but I don't want to distort their importance. The vanguard group compromises no more than 20 percent of the workforce, and they are not the dominant group in the plant. I want to talk now about what the rest of the people, these 80 percent are doing.

The main conservative current is expressed when people simply don't challenge their work environment. They accept it as given and then try to find little nooks and crannies within which they can express themselves comfortably. Very few people actually like their work or take pride in it. Very few people believe that there's an equitable exchange going on between workers and management. But for a lot of different reasons, a lot of people don't challenge what goes on around them.

A lot of people who fall into this category are just timid; they're people who are not accustomed to leaving an imprint on the people around them. Most workers have been told from the day they were born that their perceptions of the world are not important to anybody. A lot of people actually believe they don't have anything important to say. A lot of people don't circulate too much in the plant: they may never talk to people 30 or 40 feet down the line from them. Maybe they lack self-confidence. Maybe they
are recent immigrants and are still confused by the language and customs around them. And there are a lot of old people in the plant who have seen shop floor struggles come and go in the plant for years, and who have long since given up the hope of seeing any fundamental change. All they want to do is get out.

Most of the people in the plant are just into getting by. They maintain a low profile in the plant. They interact with a small group of friends. They do their job and go home. That's it.

A lot of people, maybe 20 percent, are into making individual deals with the foremen. These deals can be quite extensive and can radically alter their working experience. Maybe they'll get out a little early. Maybe their job won't get any more work put on it. Maybe they'll get extra overtime or a specific date for a vacation. And these people will do lots of things for the foreman in return. Maybe they'll cover a certain job if somebody doesn't show up. Maybe they'll come in early to stock the line before it starts. These people obviously contribute to the conservativeness of the situation: they're not about to rock the boat because they don't have to. We have two women in our area who have hot coffee and doughnuts ready for the plant superintendent each morning. This superintendent is a particularly devilish man—he's the one responsible for setting up all the jobs; he personally implements the speed-up in the plant. Now I have nothing against personal friendship. But of all the people in our section, these two women were the only ones who got work taken off their jobs by writing a speed-up grievance with the union. So there is definitely something fishy going on.

Conservatism is also built into the hiring policies in the plant. 90 percent of the people hired there in the last five years have had a brother or a mother or a cousin working there. Anybody else who got hired was just plain lucky. This practice doesn't totally co-opt the workforce, but it helps. It helps create a situation where people are trying to get ahead by flowing with the system instead of against it.

Something else contributes to the conservatism of the plant: lots of people concede so much to management before they begin to fight that it's hard for them to win anything. This is the basic weakness of people caught within the labor/money exchange.

I had a fight once with my partner Frank that illustrates this. He wanted me to stop reading my books because he was afraid the bosses would use it as an excuse to give us more work. Frank is the kind of guy who can never think of anything else but work in the first place, so at first I wasn't sure what to make of what he was saying. But he insisted so finally I went along. But after several hours I started up reading again. Part of it was that I was going crazy. And part of it was that I felt like not reading was putting us in a position of weakness vis-a-vis the foreman anyway. I don't want to always be worrying and posturing toward what they might do. If they're going to do something, let them go ahead and do it. And until that time comes, I'm going to worry
about what I want to do. I knew I was taking a chance by reading. But part of what I was telling the foreman by reading was that he would sure as hell have a fight on his hands if he came around messing with us. That seemed to me to be a much stronger position to be in.

This bargaining-from-weakness is also clearly characteristic of the union. The union is not an offensive organization in that it attempts to advance the interests of the workers even if that means fundamental changes in the society. The union is a defensive organization. It's trying hard now to maintain a certain terrain on which it and the company can bargain to their mutual advantage. It is possible for the union to win concessions from management. But management can win concessions from the union—primarily it wants the union to guarantee labor stability. So the union is required by definition to try and force the workers to funnel all their discontent into the grievance procedure.

Now I hope it's clear from what I've said so far that the union is not at all successful in doing this. Workers have a lot of other ways of fighting back. There are a lot of good strong militants who refuse on principle to call the union. Most people will call the union because it is one option open to them and because it does complicate the life of a foreman. But it's not their main tactic: people know that if all they can do is write a grievance about something then they are in a lot of trouble. One of the most telling indications of the state of the union today is that the best militants, the leaders of this vanguard for instance, don't run for union positions. Instead what you get in the union are the politicians, the people who feel some personal motivation to play that kind of role. The decision about who would be a good rep is almost never a collective decision in a department.

The basic weakness of the union is that it's tied directly to the labor/money exchange and it can't move away from it. The union tries to alter that exchange so that the balance is more in favor of the workers. But it's constantly on the defensive. A good example of this is that the company has in the last year fired several people for collecting unemployment or welfare at the same time they were on the company payroll. Some of these people got their jobs back, but the company obviously extracted a price. By being forced to deal with those kinds of issues, the union is continually sacrificing its ability to push for more offensive gains. Another example of this at Fleetwood is the paralysis of the local union. We haven't had a local contract in about 18 months. For much of that time the local union has been begging the International to let them go on strike. But the International constantly jams them up. So now, all of a sudden we've got a soft market for Cadillacs and we've got the threat of layoffs because of the coal strike. So now, lo and behold, the International is supposedly ready to let us go out on strike. It's ridiculous.

Probably the saddest statement about the union today is that in many ways it actually works against the development of a collective identity
among the workers. They don't settle grievances on their merit; they trade
groups of grievances off one against the other. That means almost by
definition that the interests of the younger workers are sacrificed for the
interests of the older workers. Workers are not allowed to comment on any
grievances but their own. Departmental meetings to discuss union affairs
are avoided like the plague. And the only real cooperation between differ-
ent locals is over the wage and benefit packages in the national agreement.
On matters of health and safety and so on, each local is left to slug it out
alone.

Now I'm not suggesting doing away with the union or anything like that.
Sometimes that's all you've got. I myself was fired at Fleetwood once, and I
spent the next four months on the telephone. I was almost begging those
union guys to take up my case. The weakness of the union is built into the
very essence of the institution. It's not dependent on the personalities of
certain "bureaucrats" or anything like that.

This is especially true when the union is rapidly deteriorating into a
simple interest group mechanism. The union today is clearly moving toward
protectionism. It's not moving toward more militant pursuit of the workers'
interests.

The auto industry is not in very good shape today. It's in a short term
slump which they didn't anticipate and which they are hoping won't be too
severe. And the long-term stagnation the industry faces is obvious: the
industry is on an international level too big. They have the capacity to build
more cars than the market can bear, but they have to run the system at near
or full capacity in order to be profitable. We'll be seeing cutbacks in the next
good years as some of the older plants get phased out. And we'll be seeing a
series of classic business cycles in which the market is periodically flooded
and then drained of cars. And in an atmosphere already characterized by
high unemployment, auto workers will be increasingly on the defensive.
And the auto companies will use their plight to extract concessions from the
workers, the unions and anyone else they can get their hands on.

Of all the issues that come up in the plant, the issue of layoffs is one of
the most difficult for me to relate to politically. It cuts the guts right out of
workers struggles in the plant. Most workers see the handwriting on the wall
and regard it with resignation, because they see clearly how the layoffs cut
into their own ability to fight. How do you fight something that big, espe-
cially when all the options are lousy? A lot of politicians are into throwing
around the slogan of "Save our Jobs." But all these ideas are variations on
the same theme: the government steps in to either prop the industry up or
else to cut off foreign imports. Neither of these suggestions could funda-
mentally change the economy to the long-term advantage of the workers.
Both these suggestions leave the workers in a totally defenseless position in
the plant, and leave auto workers pitted against other groups in the society:
either other displaced groups who could also use the government money or
else auto workers in other countries who could also use the work. And so all
of these scenarios set up tremendously volatile political pressures in the society.

The union, of course, will fight to hang on to its present base of power. It's simple: the less members it has, the less clout it has. And so they'll get sucked right into the protectionist tide. This has already happened in such industries as steel and clothing, where the companies and the unions march hand in hand down to Washington to plead for relief. A good thing to watch will be if the UAW abandons its traditional policy against import controls on foreign cars. I would go so far as to predict it'll happen soon, and when it does, you know they're running scared.

I've been listing all these conservative trends in the plant, and I can't finish up without listing the most conservative trend of all, and that is the government itself. It's not just conservative; it's downright repressive. And it's the ultimate obstacle that auto workers face today.

There's no better example of this than what happened down at the Trenton Engine plant. They have a problem with heat down there; the temperature can go up to 130 degrees in the summer. After many years of struggle about this the company finally agreed in writing to give people passes to go home early if it got too hot. But during a heatwave last summer the company suddenly stopped giving people passes. A lot of bitterness resulted and then a walkout. But after a few days of this, the company called in the government, and the government was more than happy to oblige. They issued an injunction against picketing, and then they hauled seven people at random out of a crowd and charged them with contempt of court. These people actually went to jail. The strike ended and a lot of people were disciplined. And by then the only thing the union could do was to try to get some of the penalties removed. All but one of the people who were fired were eventually brought back. But the plant is still hot. The union is still pretty helpless in trying to do anything about it. And the workers now know that if they take matters into their own hands again they'll have to take the government all over again to get anywhere.

Now I don't want to sound like a pessimist or anything. I think that what the workers did at Trenton was fantastic and I think they deserve all the support we can give them. But we have to be clear what the dangers are: the stronger the workers got at Trenton the more heat they brought down on themselves. And if it happened at Trenton it'll happen at Fleetwood or anywhere else workers get too strong. If we're talking about any fundamental changes taking place on the shop floor, the government is the ultimate obstacle we'll have to contend with. The same thing is pointed out very clearly by the coal strike. (See Chapter 17.)

CONCLUSION

The advanced currents in the plant do contain the potential for changes in the society. But people committed to them face a lot of problems. The most immediate dilemma faced by these vanguard workers is that they have
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to continually reaffirm their short-term interests as workers in the society even though they're rebelling against that very role in the long run. Each day for them is a continuing, painful purgatory. They make compromises which are even more painful for them because they are acutely aware of their powerlessness. The vanguard people know they need to work in order to survive, even though they hate that work from the start. They know they need the union, even though it's clearly an expression of their weakness more than their strength. They know a layoff would make them weak, even though their presence in the plant has been the focus of their rebellion for years.

Another basic problem of the vanguard workers is that they are frozen into place now because so many workers around them are committed to conservative courses of action. And they are frozen into place by their isolation in one plant: it's very difficult for these vanguard groups to link up between plants. It's very difficult for them to link up with other sectors of the population who share their basic alienation from the present organization of society.

Now I don't have the answers to these dilemmas in the classic sense. I can't roll out a magic formula that will solve the problems overnight. All I can do is point out one or two things that can be done to move the situation ahead from where it is now.

The main thing I'd like to see in the short run is for the vanguard groups at Fleetwood and elsewhere to get more articulate and outspoken about what they do. Their activity provides not only a vivid condemnation of how the society is presently organized. It also provides a lot of clues about how the society can be transcended. I'd like to see these groups have public meetings to actually express their views to the rest of society. An immediate advantage of this is that the vanguard groups could fill a tremendous void in the society. Politicians from Jimmy Carter on down justify what they do at least rhetorically by claiming to speak for "the common man." If workers themselves said what they think, particularly if these vanguard groups said what they don't like about the society, the entire political complexion of the country would change. If these vanguard groups could coordinate their activity on a multiplant basis, they'd be an incredibly powerful force in the society.

Now maybe I can be accused of putting the best possible light on the subject, but I am convinced that these vanguard groups are becoming more articulate these days. I think the fact that I've been able to make this kind of speech to this kind of group is evidence of this fact. This articulation is a very slow process of course, and there are a lot of problems.

I think one of the main problems is the language itself. Workers are not trained to think that their perceptions of the world are important. And so many workers are not skilled in the arts of communication. A lot of workers don't read. Very few write. Our language is the language of domination of
the people at the bottom of society, not the language of their self-expression.

Another linguistic problem is political: what would you call a meeting in which vanguard groups of several plants got together? Would it be a “Socialist” meeting? Would it be forming a “party”? I don’t know. I’ve had more exposure to these words than most people in the room, and it’s still hard for me to say what they mean. And most of what they ordinarily mean is bad. But what words would you use to describe what you’d be doing?

Another problem is time: workers are generally so busy just trying to survive that they can’t be running around to meetings all the time. This is particularly true if the premises of the meeting aren’t all that clear.

But in general, I’d say the main problem facing these vanguard groups is theoretical in nature. Right now, they’re organized in a negative way, around what they don’t like. In order to switch over to a positive organization, in order to fight for what they do like, they’d have to completely transform their outlook. They’d have to begin to try and create something that they thought was important.

This is a very cynical age we’re living through. And workers have more reason to be cynical than most people. To create a positive organization in such an age is a difficult thing: it’s time consuming; there’s lots of unclarity about what you’d be doing; and the forces of repression are never far behind.

But if these vanguard groups did opt for a positive organization, they’d have a lot to gain. Their activity already embodies a serious alternative to this society. Any further articulation and coordination of that activity would allow them to swing a lot of weight.

The initial step is for these vanguard groups to begin seriously communicating their views to the rest of society. In so doing, they’ve already rejected the dominant notion in the society that workers have nothing important to say. They’ve already rejected the cynicism and self-contempt which are part of being a worker today; these attitudes are nothing but a reflection of powerlessness. In trying to build these positive organizations, these workers would actually have to achieve the age-old dream of becoming “actors on the stage of history.” They’d be completely transcending the role of worker as we know it today.

The potential for these developments is clearly present at Fleetwood and elsewhere today. How far it can go, what obstacles remain: there’s still a lot we don’t know yet. But one thing we can say for sure. The situation in the plant is such that we are not starting from scratch.