

Lean production or mean production?

Japanese auto plants in the US

Many employers argue that new Japanese management techniques make trade unions redundant. However a recent survey at Mazda in the US shows how wrong this view is. DENIS MACSHANE* reports.

A fascinating survey carried out among 2 400 workers in a Mazda assembly plant in Detroit, Michigan suggests that so-called lean production management techniques rely as much on managerial authority, relentlessly hard work, and dividing workers against each other as it does on new participatory harnessing of workers' intelligence and skills.

One of the main objects of the evangelists of lean production is to argue that trade unions are outdated obstacles to modern human resources management based on the company's relationship with the individual worker. Instead, suggests this unique survey, unions are essential to help implement and manage lean production techniques to the joint benefit of workers and the employer.

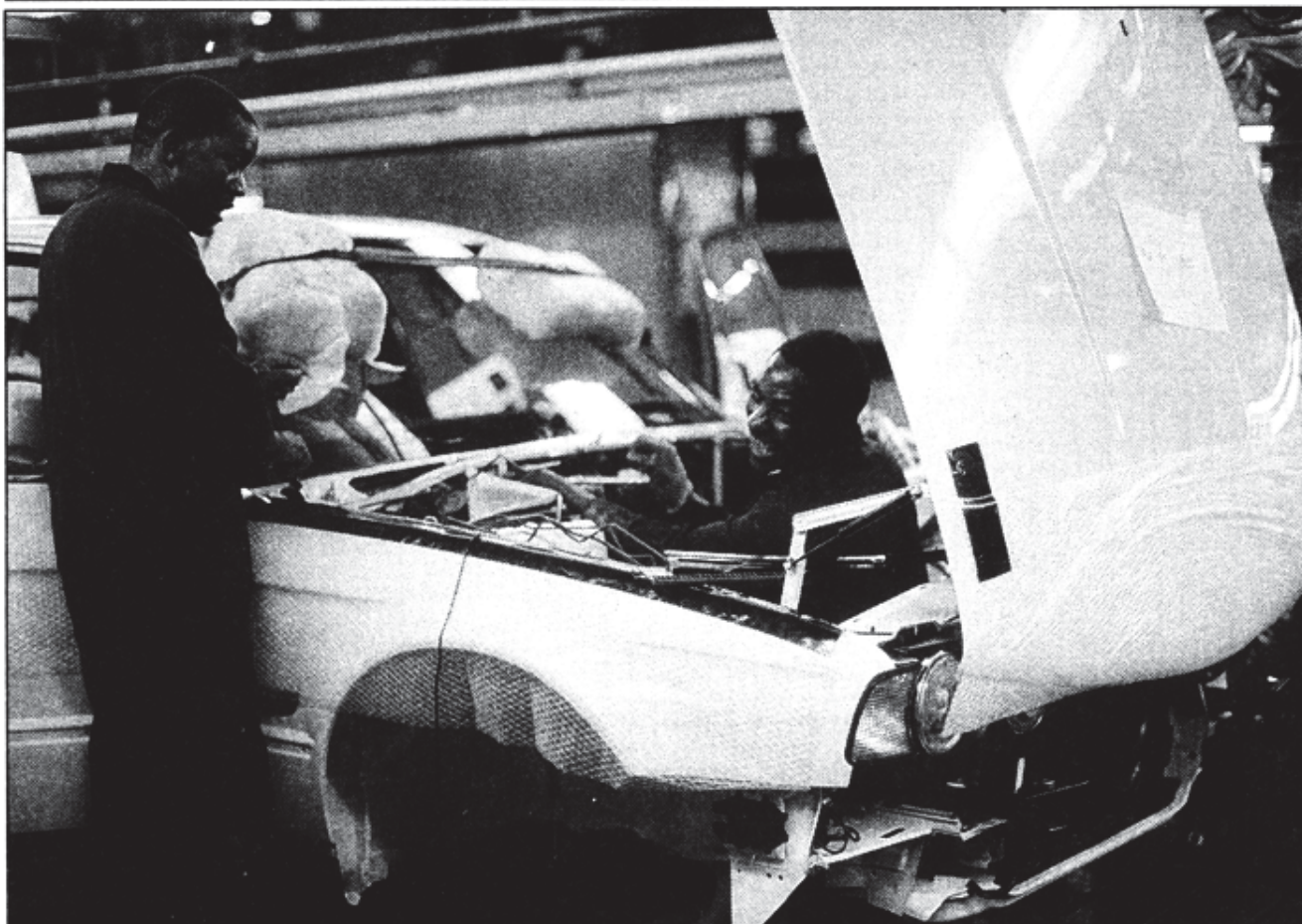
The United Auto Workers (UAW) union survey was carried out, with the help of Wayne State University, among workers at Mazda's plant in Flat Rock in Michigan. Mazda is one

of the leading Japanese assembly plants in the United States. It began operations in 1987 and produces 300 000 cars annually.

Unlike Nissan and Toyota, which sited their main American plants in the non-unionised states of Tennessee and Kentucky in a bid to avoid union recognition, Mazda signed a recognition deal with the UAW in unionised Michigan. Many of the workers recruited had previous car assembly experience in the Detroit factories of General Motors, Ford and Chrysler. But the UAW agreed Mazda managers would operate according to their lean production philosophy of human resource management.

Until now, most criticisms of the internal pressures caused by 'lean production' techniques have been anecdotal with little scientific backing. The Mazda survey, however, raises serious questions about the long-term viability of 'lean production' unless it is adapted to take into account normal human

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Auto plant in SA: workers need union defence against lean production

Photo: Shariff

needs at work.

The most famous advocates of lean production are three academics who wrote a book published in 1990 titled *THE MACHINE THAT CHANGED THE WORLD*. The book was widely quoted by business newspapers in many countries to support the view that lean production meant a positive new deal for autoworkers.

According to the book's authors, auto companies now provided workers with "the skills they need to control their environment" which would do away with the "mind-numbing stress" of old-fashioned mass production. Workers in lean production assembly plants would "think actively, indeed proactively" and help make their work "humanly fulfilling".

None of these researchers, of course, had ever worked on an auto assembly line, nor taken part in union negotiating or representation, and the evidence from the Mazda survey shows how wrong they were.

New deal or mean deal?

One of the most significant replies from the Mazda workers showed that 73% of 2 186 questioned declared that with lean production workloads: "I will likely be injured or worn out before I retire."

As part of Mazda's lean production techniques, the Michigan workers were given a Programmed Work Sheet (PWS) which described in detail their job. But far from the changes included in the PWS system leading to increasing freedom, workers found they involved more control.

Some 67% of those surveyed found that their job had become worse.

To help introduce workers to lean production techniques, Mazda promised increased job training, but 43% of the workforce found the training to be "poor" while 46% considered the training to be only "fair".

Another claim for lean production is the team leader system whereby a worker is

chosen to act as a monitor and extra helper to a group of workers. The team leaders form an intermediary stratum between supervisors and workers, but are paid hourly and identified as workers, not as junior foremen.

According to the Mazda survey, most workers considered the team leaders as representatives of management, not as part of the workplace team. Another 84% of those surveyed wanted a different process of selecting – or electing – the team leader so that s/he was closer to the work team s/he leads.

Finally, the advocates of lean production believe it will reduce the desire or need of workers to go on strike. In the UAW survey, however, 91% of the workers who had experienced lean production believed workers had to retain the right to strike on health and safety standard issues.

Armed with the results of the survey the UAW negotiated a new contract at Mazda in Flat Rock which introduced more flexibility and made team leaders subject to election and recall by their colleagues. It was part of a process of humanising lean production methods by proactive trade union intervention.

In 1992, the Japanese Federation of Auto Workers Unions published a stinging critical analysis of Japanese car companies and their exploitation of Japanese car workers. So in the heart of lean production – Japan – the criticisms are mounting even as West European and American researchers proclaim that a new dawn of lean production has arrived to liberate the car worker from previous oppressions.

The auto companies themselves do not believe this nonsense – which is why they continue to seek to impose lean production on the basis of non-union operations. In the United States, Japanese multinationals such as Nissan and Toyota have spent millions of dollars to keep the UAW out of assembly plants. In Britain, Honda has begun operations in Europe's first non-unionised auto plant in Swindon. In France, the main European advocates of lean production, Renault and Peugeot, are fanatically

anti-union, and French car workers are the least unionised in Europe.

Certainly, the concept of lean production is a valuable one in defining new methods of car manufacturing which require far fewer workers.

But the voice from the shopfloor, as expressed by the Mazda workers in Michigan, is that lean production still entails hard, health-breaking work. Moreover, this work is carried out under authoritarian control. Trade unions need to be there to represent workers' needs and grievances and ensure that lean production does not become mean production – no different, in terms of stress and strain on the worker, from previous systems of car assembly labour.

Strike against lean production

Meanwhile in Canada, the first-ever strike has broken out at a Japanese transplant car factory in North America. Suzuki, in a joint venture with General Motors (GM), assembles Suzuki Swifts at a plant in Ingersoll, Ontario. As part of lean production techniques, workers were banned from reading newspapers or listening to the radio while taking a break.

They are also angry about management exploitation of a non-traditional (by North American standards) agreement with company and union which is designed "to avoid labour-management confrontations, reduce job classification, and give managers more flexibility in reassigning workers."

Ron Pellerin, the Canadian Auto Workers official responsible for the plant said: "We're going to have to go back and spell out the rules in a collective agreement. No more of this trust and co-operation business."

Suzuki workers blame GM managers' style of interpreting Suzuki's managerial philosophy rather than the Japanese company itself. But the strike, along with the Mazda survey, suggests that Japanese-style 'lean production' is neither fault-free, nor does it eliminate worker-management tensions. These still require a trade union presence to resolve them before they explode. ☆