

“Made in St. Paul: Stories from the Ford plant”

Tim O’Brien

Skills enhancement coordinator, UAW-Ford Skills Enhancement Center coordinator
Interviewed by Peter Myers, May 2017

QUESTION

Start with who you are and both of your involvements with the Ford plant.

TIM O’BRIEN

My name is Tim O’Brien. And I was the coordinator of the Skills Enhancement Center which was sort of front and center in the Training Center in the new training center at the UAW Ford Twin Cities Assembly Plant. And the skills enhancement center was run by the St. Paul Public Schools. It was a contract with the UAW and Ford through their joint programs. And I was invited to be the Coordinator there by St. Paul Schools. I was working at South Hennepin in education. I was invited to go there partly because they felt that maybe I had the chops to manage the five different kinds of bosses that you might have in a position like that. And so and it did turn out to be sort of a navigation project.

So over the ten years that I worked there in that capacity, I got to know hundreds of UAW Ford employees. And became friends with many of them. And this idea hatched in my head to try to see what a group of line workers would come up with for a social movement project. And then using the opportunity to pull them together and have them talk and have rich discussions to see how it would change their opinions, change their views, how they could come together and reach consensus. So that was the basis for my dissertation project which was great. They had shut the skilled enhancement centers down as part of their austerity program and the buyouts and all that kind of stuff, and so I was actually back at St. Paul Schools. But a lot of the workers had Fridays off and they agreed to come. And so we would meet on Fridays at the training center in the board room. And I would bring in lunch and we would do the 3-4-hour session, so, it was great.

QUESTION

Was this opportunity to have a formalized, lengthy discussion about issues like this—was this probably something new for most of them, this kind of setting?

O’BRIEN

Some of them were pretty active in union committees and so I think that having hearty discussions was not something that was terribly foreign to them. Some of them were pretty active in their faith communities and so I’m not sure that that was particularly the case, but to take something that was originally theirs to politicize some project that was completely of their own creation. And what I had done was interviews ahead of time and teased out some themes. And so I put the two groups together, actually I did two groups of folks based on a couple of slightly different themes. And then put them together because those themes resonated with them. And then we just sort of launched it from there. It was really good. We had lively discussions, some of the dysfunction that probably happens at union meetings and everything happened in these situations. But they were all just wonderfully engaged and it was great.

QUESTION

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Brief description of the training program that existed at Ford UAW when you started your work there.... types of training offered....

O'BRIEN

I think training was a challenge in the UAW. The contracts called for the company to be able to run 50-hour weeks anytime they wanted. And of course with overhead and that sort of accounting running 50 hours was always more efficient than running 40. And so the plant ran at 50 hours as much as it could. So at Twin Cities Assembly they ran 10-hour shifts and then they would run 5 days a week and sometimes there was even more mandatory overtime. So there wasn't a lot of energy for taking advantage of some of the benefits that Ford and the UAW offered, and I think in some ways it was generous in the sense that they knew that a lot of people weren't gonna take advantage of it. So they had about 5,000 dollars a year in tuition I think. If I remember correctly. I mean it was a good chunk of money and at least when they first negotiated it, it was more than enough to do a year of community college. And, and so you could get through a 2-year degree or a 4-year degree and you could do it. If you could manage to figure out how to do it, work nights and go to school days, and get enough sleep, you could do it.

The other way to launch a training was through the joint apprenticeship program, and we can talk about that a little bit later. But that was something that was highly sought after: to get a trade and get trained through the Ford system. But as far as other training programs go, there was a tension there between people trying to learn about this new computer technology. Ford had done this sort of off-the-hip, “everybody at Ford's gonna get a computer” kinds of launches, and they did all kinds of things like that. So we did a lot of catch-up in trying to get people so that they could start these machines. And there was this funny story about this guy who had visited a porn site and it had put a pornographic picture on his computer. And he didn't want his wife to see it and he was really embarrassed about it. So he put a piece of duct tape on the screen to cover it up, and then he came in and said, ‘How do I get rid of this?!’ So we had a lot of people walking in with their CPUs and their computers trying to fix stuff like that. But anyway it was interesting. But then, a lot of people had these training monies that they were not using and they were complaining about it. Like, why can't we use this for whatever we want? And so, in the Ford system, they came up with these vendors that would do these trainings. And so there was an air compressor building training. A generator training. And a lot of people would just sign up to get a generator. A lot of people would just sign up to get an air compressor. A lot of people would just sign up to get these pieces of equipment. Because they weren't using their money and they sort of felt like they were owed it. Those benefits were negotiated for them in lieu of pay increases. And so there was a sense of entitlement. And so, so there was always this attempt to try to get 'em to come to the classes.

QUESTION

Huge number of people working on the line, small number of joint apprenticeships available ... How competitive was it, how many line workers wanted to do it?

O'BRIEN

There was a lot of controversy around the apprenticeship program while I was there. When we started out, it was the way it had always been and the skilled enhancement center was tasked with providing quick brush-ups for people who wanted to brush up for the math and reading and other parts. And so we actually had some classes in the training center auditorium. We'd

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have a hundred and fifty people show up and want to do math brush-up. And our staff they were all licensed teachers and they were all able to step up and do that kind of work. It was always really hard because the announcement for the test would come and then there would only be like a month to prepare and so we only had three weeks and what—you can do a lot with three weeks if it's just scraping' rust off, but if people don't have the fundamentals, it's a hard road. So, people would try to get as brushed up as they could and pack as much in this as they could. And then take the test. So hundreds and hundreds of people took the test. And really it was like a lottery thing for a lot of people. They felt like the system was rigged against them. People that had taken the test maybe five or six times. And so there were a lot of conspiracy theories and discontent around it.

But it turned out to be kind of a racist project because in the first place, standardized tests—it's the same thing that we run across in education. That standardized tests tend to be biased toward a certain cultural capital to begin with. But they were taking the top just whatever they needed, so they would take someone who got a hundred percent on the test, someone who got 99.8 percent on the test, and they would just take the top levels down to wherever they were. And so, there were some women—but it was mostly men—that scored best on the test. And they tended to be people who had either private education or some college. Had had more opportunities and tended to be white. So racially, the outcomes of that sorting of that discrimination device, which all standardized testing is it's trying to discriminate based on what it discriminated based on was your academic skills. And it was only the absolute highest academic skills. Which discriminated even more. If they had been discriminated based on what it took to be a good electrician, or what it took to be a good pipefitter, if they had been able to put together some assessments that would have actually looked at that stuff, it would've been a whole different ball game. But that wasn't the discrimination device that they were using. And so they ended up getting sued and they were found to be a racially discriminatory test. So they had to change how they did it. And basically the way they decided to change to do it, and this is just my, my personal memory of it, was that they dropped the level to about 75 percent. And then they took people on the basis of seniority. Within that group. And then that really changed the complexion of the apprentices. They would tend to not be so young. Because if you got somebody just out of college, they were going to nail that test, right? And so they ended up getting a much older and more diverse apprenticeship group.

QUESTION

Once people got into the program and went through it, I assume they would have more intellectually satisfying jobs. Did that end up being a different class of citizen from the rest of the UAW folks still working on the line? Did it tend to separate those two groups of people a little bit?

O'BRIEN

Yeah. From my perspective, it was clearly that way. There was a big division. And actually the leadership the person who became the building chair—the building chairman was the most important position in the plant across the Ford system. Building chairs were the most powerful UAW positions. President was also important but it wasn't as powerful as the building chairs.

QUESTION

Can you say briefly what is the Building Chair and what role that person has....

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O'BRIEN

The Building Chairman is the leader of the rank and file UAW. And the UAW was designed as an industrial union. One union for everybody. So there wasn't a different electrical. There was an attempt to bring the family together. That of course made the local buildings and trades folks upset because they couldn't get entrance into the plant. Ford did their own internal trade development. But it was very clear that when a building chairman was from the skilled trades, it was a sense that he's just going to be for the trades and when a building tradesmen were when the building chairman was from the rank and file, then, you know the skilled trades might circle the wagons and put some concerted pressure on. So they seemed to be advocating for slightly different things. Within the system a lot of the skilled trades folks saw it as a way to make a hundred thousand dollars a year. And the way to do that was to get a job that you could do 7 days a week, which meant that there was a lot of sitting around, a lot of monitoring, a lot of looking and waiting for a crisis to happen. And then being there to fix it when it—when it was. And so those were jobs that had a lot of longevity, in other words, people could survive working 7 days a week. Doing that. They made a lot of money. So there was a tension around that as well. Across the plant.

QUESTION

How typical or atypical was it to have just one union in the plant representing all the hourly workers.....?

O'BRIEN

I think when you talked about the camaraderie that people had, their sense of family and their sense of feeling of connection in the plant, I think that definitely had something to do with it. All the union meetings, they were all together. The usual suspects would be there most of the time and then when there was something really big the hall would get packed and you know there'd be too many people to fit in it. But I think that for the most part, having one union really did bring people together. And even the people that were offended by unions and upset by unions, there was just one union that they could be upset about. People would get active in the union and then get disgruntled and then walk away. Later on, after the buyouts, and after the restructuring started to happen, they went from a two-tier system to a three-tier pay system or a four-tier however many it ended up being. They brought in vendors to do the cleaning. They brought in vendors to do the electrical work. They brought in vendors to do the plumbing and pipe fitting. They had vendors on the floor. And they were not UAW members. They were local tradespeople with their local unions. And I think it did change dramatically the feel of the place. There was a lot of turnover as well.

QUESTION

What did you observe when workers left at end of day as people went home?

O'BRIEN

As part of the experience for me at the skills enhancement center, we spent a lot of out on the floor. Flyering and talking to people and sometimes doing some educational stuff right on the line because it was the only way that those people could scrounge time. They had kids at home or they had lots of life things. And so, one of the things that we would do is flyer at the door, which I never thought was as good as walking around and you know actually walking the lines and putting flyers on people's tables next to their coffee and talking to 'em and being there to

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answer questions. But one of the things about sitting at that vantage point is you can watch people you know kind of coming off the line and just sort of observe how they do that.

Now, as I thought about this question, some people thrived at the plant. It was their social organization, they clearly were fully human—and just loved being there and had a wonderful experience and some people’s whole lives were tied up at the plant. But there were a lot of other people who commuted two hours a day because they wanted to live in the country. And the kind of assembly work that they were doing was so alienated from what they desired to do. And for some of those folks, you could just see ‘em because I was at a vantage point where I could see people from about a block away. And you could see how people gathered their things up and they were walking out of the assembly plant, the internationally renowned industrial structure. And it was all daylight. They were putting cars together by natural light with no electricity. No added light when that place was built. And then at some point, they had shuttered all the windows. They had covered ‘em all up with sort of green plastic coverings and so everything was under fluorescent lights. So it was very dark in there at night, it was dark in there during the day. And you could just see ‘em coming out the entrance and sunlight would be just pouring into this place. And they would see the sunlight and their heads would sort of start to come up and they would start to almost—you could almost see a transformation. And then, and then sometimes if we had a lot of people flyering and someone had a question, one of the things that I would do is walk out with ‘em because it was a way to have a conversation with them on their time. There was sort of this essence that they were willing to talk to me on Ford time but they didn’t want to talk to me on their own time. And I didn’t blame ‘em at all. And just to watch that transformation as they got out in the parking lot and the sun’s out and they’re sort of beginning to move their body in a more natural way. And it just was really an amazing thing to watch. And I watched it many, many times. I watched people just sort of come off the line and become human. I mean their bodies would be straighter and their heads would be up higher, and I really understood the alienating nature of this grinding work that they were doing. And it just showed.

QUESTION

Talk a bit about the overall culture of the plant. Was there much of a chance for brief conversations among co-workers or music to balance the monotony?

O’BRIEN

I spent a lot of time on the IP line but I spent a lot of time on other lines as well. But the IP line just stands out for me because I would see the same 10 people on that line every Thursday night. And just check in with them and see how they were doing and talk to ‘em. And there was a lot of banter, a lot of support, they knew each other’s personal lives. There would be a birthday on the line and there would almost always be a cake and a celebration. They took breaks together at lunch and when the line would shut down. Tag relief probably made that a little bit more difficult, but even people on their breaks would go and sit next to somebody who was working. And catch up. So there were tremendous friendships that were built along the line.

And over time, as people would transfer to new jobs and other kinds of jobs, those friendships continued. And so someone might take a break and they’d walk four lines over and catch up with their buddy. So there were very, very close relationships.

QUESTION

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How challenging was it for people who'd grown up without computers and robotics to understand and learn and manage these robots?

O'BRIEN

Robotics were an important part of the plant in that technology infusion. The union didn't have much complaint about the robotics partly because some of the robots were doing some work that people really didn't want to do, that was unhealthy, probably to get to your question about the biggest plant shifts, the department that took the biggest hit in terms of displacement was the paint department. I think they used to have a hundred and fifty people in the paint department and by the time I got there, they had installed these FANUC robots. Two of them could paint a truck in about a minute. There were a couple spots that the robot couldn't get very well and so there were two painters then who would just do about ten seconds' worth of painting and that was it. So virtually all of the painting that was done originally on those vehicles was done by robots. And then of course there were prime and these different coatings that were put on, so those were all done by robot as well. So, all but the idea was it was that happened to the plant was that speeding up the paint line creating efficiency in the paint lines actually sped the line up. And so, in order to speed the lineup, which was always Henry Ford's mantra, the more efficient it was. So they went into jobs all over the plant. But the bulk of the numbers got added into the trim line. Which was the one place where they needed lots of hands.

And I remember this one I remember actually twice while I was there they were attempting to get a robot to install the steering wheel on the instrument panel. And it was just a fiasco. The engineer from Dearborn or wherever was so sure that it could be done the first time they did it they put it right on the line and it was completely mucking everything up so they had to pull the instrument panel off and have a human put the thing on. And then the robot would try it again and it probably lasted about a week. And then they just gave up on it. And then they tried it again but the second time they tried it, they pulled IPs off the line as opposed to having 'em having it muck up the line. And then they couldn't get that one to work either. So they took two shots at it. So there really were a lot of jobs that had to be done by hand. And the trim line was filled with those.

QUESTION

I heard sometimes it was line workers who would call out a problem on a particular vehicle and want to stop the line, but a supervisor might come by and say, “let it go, we can't afford to shut it down for this.” Did you witness this sort of tension and how did those issues get resolved?

O'BRIEN

It was a fairly constant source of tension. The Stop Button program was something instituted by the UAW. It was negotiated, and I never really understood before coming to the Twin Cities Assembly plant, the source of the division of labor in terms of quality that I always thought that quality would have been a management issue. And Twin Cities Assembly was clearly a UAW issue. I'm sure this went back to the Reuthers and it was embedded in the culture of the UAW. But they were in charge of quality. And made sure that the vehicles were built right. And because they felt that it was their reputation on the line. That it was their work and they didn't want sloppy stuff going out the door.

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There were situations, many situations, where a new batch of screws would come in or somebody would figure out how to save half a cent on a particular component and in midstream they would just shift. And then the Beta testing was right on the line and sometimes it failed dramatically. Or there would be a screw gun that wasn't functioning right or something would be bad. And if you think about all the thousands and thousands of pieces of equipment going in together to make this happen, it wouldn't be unusual for some sort of quality issue to come up every night. I witnessed the stop button being used in the way that it was supposed to be used, where there was a quality issue, it was something that the operator didn't feel like could be sent down the line. And they'd hit the button. And I watched managers, line managers, come up and hit the green Go button and then and then go find out what the issue was. You know they would put the line back on and then even before they knew what it'd been turned off for, and then there would be this wrangling back and forth. And I saw several times where a UAW member would walk up and turn it off and then a manager turned it back on. Sort of going back and forth like that.

O'BRIEN

I did see quite a bit of tension around quality. I heard stories. Some of the folks you were talking about the skilled trades having been a job that sort of uplifted people off the line. Well, when I got there, I was doing a cultural investigation being that my background was in anthropology so I was sort of trying to really figure this plant out fast because I had never really been in an industrial setting before. And it became really clear to me that the people walking around with these brown outfits on, they were at the absolute top of the pecking order in terms of jobs. And I got to know many of the people in what they call maintenance. But they were booth cleaners, and they were janitors, basically. So the janitorial position was the highest position because it was a free effort job. And you cleaned up spills and things like that and you had a daily thing to clean but there was a lot of free time. And so a lot of the janitorial staff would run some vending, you know, coffee on the line and then some other things and had some side jobs and but they would go and do the rounds every day and visit their friends and it was a great job. I mean it really was the best job in the plant.

And so when they offloaded those to minimum wage jobs, with some cleaning company, it really gutted the whole system. Because there were people that worked there for 30 years and would get that job. And it might mean that they could wind down their career with a job that wasn't so hard on their body..

QUESTION

Line Managers or Supervisors—did they come out of management or rank and file? How did someone get to be a Floor Supervisor?

O'BRIEN

Boy, it was a pretty interesting mix. There were managers that came out of the UAW and they tended to be the better ones. But I saw times when they would just bring in young kids, fresh out of college. Who would apply for these jobs and come in and they just had no idea what they were getting themselves into. They'd be running a line of body build at night and no one was around to support them or help them out and they got the brunt of being in the middle of things. And they just a lot of these young folks didn't have a lot of experience to be able handle that kind of pressures. And so there was a lot of turnover.

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QUESTION

Demographics and racial diversity in the plant, what you observed about dynamics and relationships.....

O'BRIEN

Diversity in the plant happened several different ways. The ebb and flow of job opportunities, people within the Twin Cities community living in Summit U or places where I live, there was sort of a natural balancing of the city's racial makeup. But it didn't it was just moving in that direction. It wasn't anywhere near that way. And particularly in terms of women. But racial balancing in the plant happened in leaps. And what would happen is plants would shut down within the Ford system and people would have an opportunity to come to another plant. And so, when they redid the plant, for the '90, '91 model, which ended up being the same model basically that we had all the way until the plant closed. There were a bunch of people from New Jersey and other places, other plants, that came in, and they were they were treated like scabs by some folks. There were big fights over seniority and how that was going to happen. And I got to know many of the folks who had come from other plants. And so that was a big piece of the culture that maybe you could explore with some other folks. I think that that really shook things up in the plant, and it was a really good thing. It was hard for those folks having to come ahead of their families. A lot of the folks that came didn't have any money saved up. Like they'd left all their resources with their family and so they'd come and they wouldn't even have a place to stay. So they were homeless, and trying to figure out apartments and so there was a lot of scrambling and there were a lot of people at the plant who welcomed them. Who brought them in, took them under their wing, and so I don't want to make it sound like the entire plant was negative about it, but there was a good contingent of folks that were really pretty mean and not welcoming at all. And part of it I think was racialized as well.

I mean you put together 2,000 people from across the country you get a cross-section of communities in which they come from and those communities end up being quite racist.

QUESTION

Do you think that over time, people from the outside were better assimilated and welcomed into the plant?

O'BRIEN

Yeah. Yeah. And some of them became very active in the union. Some of them just sort of put their heads down and moved their way, they knew how to navigate, they were old-timers and so they knew how to use the union to get into a better job, and so I think a lot of 'em quickly found themselves in good jobs —but it was a rough transition for a lot of them.

QUESTION

Pride and dedication in the workforce in general. Was there something unusual about this particular plant that instilled this sense of pride and dedication you might not always have at a manufacturing plant?

O'BRIEN

I think that Twin Cities Assembly was one of those outlying plants. It wasn't part of the network so there was sort of this stand-alone kind of sense to the plant and I do think that the UAW worked hard to promote the idea of an industrial union as opposed to trade unions, having

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competition among unions. Even though the Reuthers were long gone, I think there was still a pretty strong sense of that that I think built solidarity in the plant. There were lots of occasions of solidarity work going on in the plant. Somebody would have a bad situation with a line manager or an area supervisor and get hauled off the line. And sometimes fired. And there were stories of co-workers just stopping work and going off, walking off the line with him and you know doing some very strong acts of solidarity that really brought into focus that they were a team, because if one person had an issue, they all had an issue. And there were a lot of people that pushed that kind of solidarity in the plant. I remember there was a big fight out in Tri Level, which was where they loaded the trucks onto the trains. And there was a lot of solidarity work in that situation. Even though the Tri Level was completely divided in terms of what their goals and aspirations were. But it was my first real sense of that sort of active solidarity. And there were a couple of old-timers within that area and that system that were leading the charge and I was very impressed.

QUESTION

Any last thoughts, observations, favorite story?

O'BRIEN

Harry Garola and his wife — she was a postal worker and he was a UAW Ford worker. And I think she might have had a high school diploma but Harry never got one. So, she came in with him and he took the GED and passed it. And so it was a big deal. He was 80 when he started with me. You get to know people when you're working with 'em like that. And he was a sniper and a scrounger in World War II and fought in both the European and the Pacific campaigns. And he was just a really amazingly creative and ingenious guy with a great sense of humor. As he was working he was a vet and vets were treated well in the Ford system. And by the UAW. And so he was brought into the plant after World War II. And he worked his way into jobs and being the resourceful person that he was. He found himself towards the end of his career of just a really good job running the management garage. And he had he had a really good relationship with the plant manager. It was a little hard to follow the complete story, but I think he had—he had actually hauled the plant manager's son out of the river below the plant. He was actually drowning. And so, Harry had actually saved his life. Or at least that was the story I got from Harry's wife.

So Harry was running this garage, and every year the plant manager, this buddy of his, would get a new Thunderbird. From the company. And they did that all the way to the end I think they would provide him with a the plant manager always got a new the new year vehicle. Harry kinda lined up his life with that and every year, Harry bought a new Thunderbird. Exactly the same as the plant managers. So it was kind of a thing like here's this UAW guy, this rank and file UAW guy, he's gonna have a T-Bird just like the plant manager. So he buys the Thunderbird that's exactly the same. So one of Harry's jobs was to wash, wax, and gas up the plant manager's car every day. So he'd come in, the car would get a wash, cleaned up, vacuumed. The whole nine yards. Oil changed, everything. And so one day the plant manager got an emergency call and came running back and didn't go into his office but went directly to the car. Directly to the garage where Harry was washing this Thunderbird. And he said, 'Harry give me the keys, I gotta go!' And Harry said, 'You know where your car is parked.' Because the guy's looking at his own car, right? And he's seeing Harry washing his car, so he thought. Harry had been washing, gassing up, doing the oil changes on his own car for years. Alongside the plant manager's car.

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And had been able to finagle this. So, it was a pretty funny story. Harry said well, that was the end of the free oil changes.

QUESTION

Gotta give the guy points for being creative.

O’BRIEN

Oh Harry was just a stitch. He was—he was a very funny man. And he had thousands of stories. He was a great storyteller.

QUESTION

Were there any World War II vets working there while you were there?

O’BRIEN

I think they were all retired. There were quite a few people who had been in Korea. And of course lots of Vietnam vets. And as time went on, Iraq vets and Afghanistan vets.

END - TIM O’BRIEN INTERVIEW