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COMMENTARY

FROM RACISM TO INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY: THE JOURNEY OF UAW LOCAL 879, 1980–1995

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This commentary is based on a paper presented as part of a panel on "Working Class Self-Activity in Transnational Contexts" at the 2013 North American Labor History Conference. It is largely based on the author's personal experiences with United Automobile Workers' Union (UAW) Local 879, an industrial union at the Ford Truck Assembly plant in Saint Paul, Minnesota. In this commentary, Rachleff traces the transformation of consciousness among white union members from racism and nationalism to new militancy, internationalism, and anti-racism. He identifies several key turning points in the rank-and-file's experiences: the arrival of several hundred workers of color from other Ford plants; the Hormel strike of the mid-1980s; Ford management's push for labor-management cooperation in the early 1990s; and the North American Free Trade Agreement. At each of these points, local leadership, education, and activism helped workers engage new ideas, perspectives, and self-awareness.

Historians of the U.S. working class and the labor movement are paying more attention to the ways that workers have understood themselves and acted—and acted and understood themselves—within a transnational framework. We see how workers' self-understanding globally has been interwoven with their self-understanding domestically. How white workers see themselves in relation to their counterparts in other countries is influenced by—and influences—how they see themselves in relation to the workers of color with whom they share workplaces, locker rooms, and union halls, and vice versa. Such formulations apply as well to how workers of color see themselves, other workers of color, and white workers, as they consider their relationships to employers, the nation state, and workers in other countries.

I want to explore these processes and dynamics through an exploration of the journey of a workforce and a local union that I was privileged to know personally—about 2,000 men and women who built Ford trucks, at the Saint Paul, Minnesota, Assembly Plant. During the 1980s and 1990s, I taught a number of workshops for union members, attended social gatherings at the union hall, participated in labor solidarity organizations and meetings which were hosted by

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the local, and developed close friendships with a number of union activists. Much of what I will discuss comes from my personal experiences and observations.

I arrived in Saint Paul in the summer of 1982 just as neoliberalism was beginning to reveal itself, while labor resistance was trying to find its form and strategy. In response to corporate demands for concessions on wages, benefits, and work rules, a group of local labor activists in touch with the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers' Union's feisty organic intellectual Tony Mazzocchi pulled together a conference they titled "We Are Not the Problem." Some organized a "Working Group on Economic Dislocation" to develop strategies in the face of plant closings. In the fall of 1983, many of the same labor activists led solidarity efforts on behalf of members of the Amalgamated Transit Workers' Union who struck Greyhound. They helped buttress picket lines which tried to block buses, leading to physical confrontations with Minneapolis police. Six months later, several hundred members of United Food and Commercial Workers' Union Local 4-P struck the Iowa Pork packinghouse in South Saint Paul. Again, labor activists from other industries and unions joined the picket lines, and there we discovered that corporate management was pursuing a strategy of recruiting African American strikebreakers through the Unemployment Office and direct leafleting in Saint Paul's Black neighborhoods. Labor activists responded with leaflets of their own and outreach to community leaders. That fall, several carloads of activists drove to Detroit to participate in the second Labor Notes Conference, where the struggle against concessions and the importance of solidarity were the key topics of the day, not only on the floor of the conference but also in the cars and vans that made the fourteen-hour drive.

Through these experiences in 1982–1984, a core of local labor activists congealed in the Twin Cities. In their midst, indeed, at their leadership, was a cadre of Ford autoworkers, members of UAW Local 879. While they came from diverse experiences and political perspectives, they agreed that management's threats of plant closings and capital flight and management's demands for concessions were their central concerns, and they advocated for militancy and solidarity as central to the labor movement's response. They produced and distributed a newsletter in the plant, called "Nuts and Bolts," in which they discussed workplace grievances, criticized the timidity of local and national union leadership, and urged workers to resist management's efforts to increase the speed and structure of work.

But they did not speak for the majority of their fellow autoworkers. Most of these workers knew that something had gone badly wrong in their employment, that they were being pushed to work harder and to accept lower wages and fewer benefits. The authors of these policies—Ford management and their counterparts at GM and Chrysler—claimed that harder work and lower pay was necessary to compete with the Japanese. Their claims were amplified by the mass media which depicted Japanese workers as obedient drones willing to work themselves to death. U.S. workers' anger and frustration focused on Asian workers, and it broke into public awareness when three unemployed white autoworkers beat Chinese-American Vincent Chin to death in Detroit. Saint Paul Ford workers, with the

assent, if not the encouragement, of UAW leadership in the local, regional, and national organizations, brought a junk Toyota to their annual summer picnic and invited rank-and-filers and their family members to plunk down a dollar and take a swing at the enemy vehicle with a sledgehammer.

Such performances expressed the racialized consciousness of many white Saint Paul autoworkers in the early 1980s and, in a classical manifestation of the "whiteness" that David Roediger has so systematically analyzed, it placed those workers in a partnership relationship with Ford management. But it would not last.

Management itself set the stage for the dissolution of the very consensus they had seemed to construct. They tightened the screws on the workers, making them work harder and longer. Time and motion engineers sought to restructure jobs so that the typical line worker was moving physically 58 seconds out of every minute. Mandatory overtime became the norm, leading to significant increases in take-home pay. But this had a dialectical impact, as workers complained bitterly that they were too exhausted to use the cabins, boats, motorbikes, and other expensive toys that they had bought. Workers who were unable to keep up with the work pace were disciplined for missing units and threatened with discharge. An epidemic of carpal tunnel and back ailments swept through the workforce. Injured workers found that there were not enough "light duty" jobs for them to return to work after bodily repair and convalescence. Ford management kept its workforce stressed, in pain, and in a high state of anger.

Over time, this anger began to refocus from the Asian "other" to management itself. An important factor in this transition was the changing composition of the local workforce. In 1983, the Saint Paul Ford Assembly Plant experienced an injection of several hundred new workers who were older, far more non-white than the traditional workforce, and ill-suited for the amped-up assembly line work that predominated. In the early 1980s, Ford had closed several aging engine and parts plants in the Northeast "rust belt" and California, and they had entered into an agreement with the national UAW to place laid off workers on a "preferential hiring list" to be offered jobs if other plants expanded. They were ranked on this list by seniority so, of course, older workers tended to be on the top. Having worked in engine and parts fabricating plants, they were little experienced with the highly fragmented, routinized, and monotonous structure of assembly line jobs, and they were arriving just at the time when local management was increasing the speed and pressure. Furthermore, while the national agreement created transfer opportunities for workers with high seniority, it did not allow them to carry their seniority into the plant and, thereby, favorably influence their work assignment. So, these experienced, older, veteran union workers, many of whom had been touched by Civil Rights, Black Power, and Chicano movements and ideologies, found themselves stuck on second shift and in the worst jobs in the plant. Many quickly joined the ranks of the injured. Given their prior experience with unions, they demanded that the local union represent them, not just in the grievance procedure but also in developing shop floor strategies and actions. Here, they found allies in the core group of activists

who were also seeking to organize their fellow workers and transform the local union around the ideas and practice of militancy and solidarity.

Initially, there was considerable contention between the new workers and the bulk of the workforce. The new workers were saddled with the appellation "preferential," and, in the Reagan era's backlash against affirmative action, local white workers, fearing that they might be displaced from their own job assignments, complained that their new co-workers were the beneficiaries of "special treatment." When some of the new hires urged the local union to demand that they be allowed to keep at least some of their seniority inside the plant, many white workers reacted angrily. Everyone was working too hard and many were working in pain. Animosity burbled quickly to the surface.

Union activists made a difference, a significant difference, in this difficult moment. Many of the new hires had not moved their families to the Twin Cities and they faced the challenges of loneliness on top of working nights and working stressful, physically difficult jobs. A number of the local activists reached out to the new workers and, with the support of their partners, welcomed them into their homes for social gatherings and holidays. Significant social relations were built outside the plant. Inside the plants and the union hall, although they were not in control of the local, the activists made significant inroads into leadership—some seats on the executive board, several committeeman positions, and the direction of the education committee. They also expressed a growing voice in the pages of the local's monthly newsletter, *The Autoworker*, contributing articles on local and national labor issues.

Activists used their new influence in the local to develop campaigns to "fight work" (the new pace and structure), to resist racism, and to practice solidarity. They began a series of workshops at the union hall, using the teaching of labor history as a vehicle to prioritize militancy and solidarity. These workshops—some of which I taught—became a place to discuss (or, sometimes, debate) the roots and legacy of racism, the strengths and weaknesses of affirmative action, and the exploration of strategies which might benefit *all* the workers in the plant. At the same time, the activists pushed for the union to create an additional layer of shop floor organizers to supplement the committeeman system. Where the original stewards in auto plants had once represented thirty or so workers, the committeeman system which had replaced it years before typically gave each committeeman the responsibility for 300 or more workers. The activists called for the creation of a network of voluntary stewards and for the training (using the local education committee again) of those stewards. The activists were particularly interested in preparing these new stewards to lead a shop floor fight against management's intensification of work. To encourage individual rank-and-file workers to resist foremen's efforts to add work to their jobs, activists pushed the local union (via turning members out to vote for their resolutions at monthly union meetings) to create a "solidarity fund." This solidarity fund was created through shop floor solicitations of workers by the new voluntary stewards. Workers who were disciplined for "refusing work" by being given time off without pay could apply to the solidarity fund to be "made whole."

While all this was going on inside UAW 879, the union became connected to the most public struggle in the national labor movement at the time. In the fall of 1984, activists from United Food and Commercial Workers' Union Local P-9—the Hormel packinghouse workers from Austin, Minnesota—addressed a meeting of Twin Cities labor activists at the UAW union hall. Heads nodded as they denounced a corporate strategy of intensifying work while slashing wages, benefits, and work rules, and interest grew as the visitors detailed their multi-faceted plan to resist that agenda. When they asked the hundred or so men and women assembled if they would be willing to organize themselves as a "Twin Cities P-9 Support Committee" for the struggle ahead, the response was enthusiastic. For the next two-plus years, Local 879 would be the heart of the solidarity effort and their union hall would serve as the host for weekly committee meetings and occasional large, raucous rallies.

(Disclosure—I was elected chairperson of this support committee and I served in this role for more than two years.)

The Hormel struggle became interwoven with the activists' efforts to resist Ford's neoliberal program, and it impacted the dynamics of the local union and the shop floor. Tom Laney, the most outspoken and dedicated of the activists, was elected president of the local, while another veteran activist, Ted LaValley, was elected shop chairman. Other activists were elected committeemen and to the executive board. A visible group among the "preferentials" became active in the local, involving themselves in the education committee, solidarity activities, and the voluntary steward program. This program expanded its activities to include disseminating information about the Hormel struggle, mobilizing workers to join picket lines in Austin, and collecting funds for food and relief for the strikers. The stewards also continued to promote direct resistance to management's efforts to restructure and speed up work. Disciplines, discharges, and even work stoppages grew, while the local's own "solidarity fund" sought to support individual workers who took a stand. On one occasion, a foreman's demand that line workers take rags and clean the assembly line after the last unit of a shift had passed by them precipitated a two shift wildcat strike and the appearance of stickers which read "On Your Feet, Not Your Knees."

The Hormel struggle brought a dizzying array of activists to Austin, many of whom arrived first in the Twin Cities where, inevitably, they appeared in events at the UAW hall. Speakers such as the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Tony Mazzocchi, Victor Reuther, Jerry Tucker, Ray Rogers, and General Baker, and singers such as Larry Long, Arlo Guthrie, Anne Feeney, and Utah Phillips brought messages of class consciousness, solidarity, and anti-racism to the audiences in the packed hall and the readers of *The Autoworker*. Their speeches and songs were discussed and debated on the Ford shop floor, and in car caravan rides down to Austin and back. The neoliberal corporate agenda, the role of the state (Minnesota's Democratic Governor Rudy Perpich had dispatched the National Guard to break the P-9 picket lines, and UAW 879 members were present to taste the tear gas), and the accommodation of the union bureaucracy, all came in for passionate analysis. Rank-and-file autoworkers were getting a priceless education.

A particularly dramatic occasion suggests the possibilities at work: In the late winter of 1985, Stanley Fisher, the president of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers' Union local at a 3M audio and videotape plant in Freehold, New Jersey (Bruce Springsteen's home town), which had been threatened with closure, came to Minnesota as part of a nationwide tour seeking solidarity. Springsteen and Willie Nelson had become significant supporters of the workers' struggle. Fisher was joined by Amon Msane, a shop steward from the Commercial, Catering, and Allied Workers Union at 3M's Johannesburg, South Africa, plant. Msane told the packed union hall how his fellow workers in South Africa, despite the strictures of the apartheid regime, had engaged in a one-day wildcat strike in support of their fellow 3M workers in New Jersey. You could have heard a pin drop when Msane screened his grainy video of hundreds of Black workers, wearing t-shirts emblazoned with the struggle's slogan—"3 M Don't Abandon Freehold: My Hometown"—pouring out of the plant, singing, dancing, and carrying banners. The audience erupted with cheers and a standing ovation. The next day, Msane was taken to Austin, where he addressed the strikers and was given a "Cram Your Spam" t-shirt to deliver to Nelson Mandela, then a prisoner on Robben Island. Weeks later, *The Autoworker* reported that Msane had been arrested upon his return to South Africa and was being held under indefinite detention, but that Mandela had been wearing his new t-shirt. Lessons of international solidarity, anti-racism, and labor militancy were being absorbed at Ford.

To be sure, the battle for the direction of UAW 879 in the late 1980s raged on. Ford management dragged its feet on the resolution of grievances and let the word go out on the floor that as long as Tom Laney, Ted LaValley, and other activists played leadership roles in the local, there would be no agreements on grievances. Local managers generated rumors that corporate headquarters was weighing closing the plant and moving their work to a more "cooperative" local or even abroad. The UAW's international and regional bureaucrats, infuriated by the activists' criticisms of their policies and practices and alarmed by the activists' relationships with critics like Victor Reuther and Jerry Tucker and the New Directions Movement, let it be known on the floor that they were not going to be rushing service and resources to the local's cause. These internal union conflicts took a toll on the activists and on the local's newly emerging cohesion and militancy. By the late 1980s, several of the most visible activists had been voted out of office and had returned to jobs on the floor. But from those positions they continued to promote a vision of militancy and solidarity.

Two developments, both rooted in neoliberalism, kept alive the rank-and-file's interests in their vision. Across its system, Ford introduced a new labor-management program called "Employee Involvement." Since the turn to neoliberalism and the assault on unions (what former UAW national president Doug Fraser had called in 1978 a "one-sided class war"), corporate management had deployed a variety of "Japanese-style" programs—"Quality of Work Life," "Quality Circles," and, now at Ford, "Employee Involvement." All sought to replace shop floor relations grounded in the defense of job descriptions, work

rules, and grievance procedures with "labor-management cooperation." Local 879 president Tom Laney warned: "If you're going to cooperate with management, this will mean you're supposed to compete with other workers." The other new development in neoliberalism—the integration of the U.S., Canadian, and Mexican economies—demonstrated just how right Laney was. This integration was pursued and achieved piecemeal long before the formal passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993, its goal to place workers in all three countries in competition with each other in what labor scholar Jeremy Brecher termed "a race to the bottom." Both developments—Employee Involvement and economic integration across North America—would occasion considerable heated debate, internal education, and growth in self-consciousness among Saint Paul Ford workers.

The controversy over employee involvement (EI), as it was called, at Ford, led UAW activists to renew their relationships with labor activists in other unions. Much as many of them had drawn together a decade earlier in response to management's demands for concessions, now it was their shared experience of management's demands for the restructuring of workplace labor–management relationships that brought them together. A network of activists launched a project called "the Meeting the Challenge of Labor-Management Cooperation with Education and Solidarity," later shortened to "the Meeting the Challenge Committee." We (disclosure—I was chairperson) organized a series of conferences and workshops for the next twelve years which attracted 500 or more attendees, generated timely articles in local labor newspapers, and provided not only a practical but also a class-conscious rationale for rejecting the structures, processes, and implications of management's call for "cooperation." As one postal worker union activist put it, these plans were like "a dead fish on the beach. It shines brightly in the moonlight, but when you get close to it, it stinks." The message of labor solidarity was re-energized more than a decade into the destructive regime of neoliberalism, and it provided a continuing basis to prevent racism and worker-on-worker competition from regaining an upper hand among local auto workers.

This would reach a new level in response to neoliberalism's efforts to achieve North American economic integration. In January 1990, local UAW activists learned that armed gunmen had been allowed into the Ford plant in Cuatitlan, Mexico, to disrupt a sit-down strike organized by workers who were protesting not only management's efforts to intensify their work but also their union's accommodation to that regime. Ten workers were shot and one, Cleto Nigmo, was killed. Saint Paul activists sprang into action. Although Tom Laney and Ted LaValley no longer held official leadership roles in the local and some of the other activists had been dislodged from their positions as committeemen and executive board members, they were still able to rally rank-and-filers to crowd into a union meeting and pass a motion allocating funds to send a small delegation to Mexico City on a fact-finding mission. When the committee recounted the events to another crowded union meeting, a motion was passed to bring three of the Mexican strikers to Saint Paul so that they might tell their story

themselves. UAW 879 members offered to take them into their homes, both to reduce the costs of the visit and to deepen their personal connections.

The three young men arrived in the late winter, and they were thrown into a frenetic speaking tour. Their stories of a pressurized work pace, deteriorating working conditions, and a union hierarchy that encouraged only further cooperation with management sounded very familiar to Saint Paul workers. But they were also impressed by the stories they heard of shop floor organizing and militant actions. One of the UAW 879 members introduced them by saying, "We went to Mexico thinking that we could help these workers, that we could teach them how to organize their union, but when we got there, we discovered that our Mexican brothers understood unionism far better than most of us did." Ford workers and other Twin Cities trade unionists were deeply moved by the stories they heard. They were encouraged to move forward in building transnational solidarity. At yet another lively union meeting, Local 879 members voted to bring together Canadian, Mexican, and U.S. Ford workers to explore the project of international solidarity.

Their actions reflected the depth and breadth of a new consciousness among many Saint Paul Ford workers. In a significant symbolic step, they voted to wear black armbands bearing Cleto Nigmo's name on the anniversary of his death, January 8. UAW 879 paid to have the armbands made (in a union shop, of course) and distributed to Ford workers across North America. This went on for much of the 1990s. They also passed resolutions, established communications networks, and hatched a new organization, MEXUSCAN, that pledged to undercut nationalism and worker competition regardless of the passage of NAFTA, which was signed into law by Bill Clinton on January 1, 1994. They hosted visitors and they sent delegations to tri-national meetings. Despite management and media pressure and the circulation of nationalistic, racist discourse on the airwaves, these workers continued to express themselves explicitly for international labor solidarity—and for solidarity among workers at home. Racism among Ford workers might not have disappeared, but its decline was noticeable. Committeemen, voluntary stewards, committee chairpersons, the editorship of and contributors to THE AUTOWORKER, and the union executive board and leadership became increasingly diverse, not just in terms of workers of color, but also in the emergence of women workers to key posts. Workers' self-understanding at Ford was significantly shifting.

Sadly, our story does not stop here. In 2006, Ford management announced its intentions to close the Saint Paul plant. More than 80% of the workers offered buy-outs took them, retired, and moved on. The UAW allowed Ford to hire several tiers of "temporary" and "casual" workers at radically reduced wages and benefits. This little twist proved so profitable that Ford kept the plant open for three additional years beyond their announced shut down. Some remaining activists within the local sought to mobilize labor and community support to fight the closing, to redesign production to electrical vehicles or environmentally friendly buses, but their efforts found little traction. Last year, the plant was

demolished and now politicians and developers squabble over what will occupy its prime real estate.

But, I would argue, some 2,000 or so workers, between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s, proved receptive to an education that enabled them to grow from a well-developed racism to a new transnational solidarity, a new class consciousness. This was an education attained in part in a classroom, but far more on a noisy, tension-filled shop floor and in a raucous union hall. It was an education in which other workers served as the teachers. At times, even, the students became their own teachers, and the teachers became students. And, now, we can all learn from this experience.

After 32 years of teaching at Macalester College, **Peter Rachleff** has turned his focus to a community-based project, the East Side Freedom Library (see http://eastsidefreedomlibrary.org) in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Working directly with workers, from labor education to solidarity efforts, remains as central to his new endeavor as it has to his past activities. Peter's articles have appeared in *Labor Notes*, *Against the Current*, *New Labor Forum*, *Monthly Review*, *New Politics*, *Dollars and Sense*, *Working USA*, *Safundi*, *Labour/Le Travail*, and many local labor publications, and he has served in leadership roles in the Working Class Studies Association and the Labor and Working Class History Association.

Note

This commentary is adapted from a paper presented at the 35th annual North American Labor History Conference—"Geographies of Labor"—at Wayne State University in Detroit. This article was part of a panel on "Working-Class Self-Activity in Transnational Contexts." The other presentations were "Hard Hats, Hippies, and Hawks," by Penny Lewis, Associate Professor at the Murphy Labor Institute at City University of New York, and "Cultural and Ideological Exchanges Between African American GIs and Okinawans during the Vietnam War," by Yuichiro Onishi, Associate Professor of African American Studies at the University of Minnesota. Valuable comments were provided by Frank Joyce, formerly with the UAW's international staff.