Some experiences from the vehicle industry

by Gerry Phelan

For wage- and salary-earners involved in vehicle assembly, class is not a dead issue. It does not present itself as an intellectual problem, as a matter of the nice determination of class boundaries, and it is not a subject that would normally be discussed over lunch. Rather does class present itself as an expression of the experience of living human beings. That experience is a day-by-day event, five days a week, of routine activity which yields a pay packet which in turn gives them access to life, to the pleasures outside work. In a normal working day the dominant activity is work, preparing for work and travelling to and from work. There is little choice about the work: what is done is done for others, the way they want it, at the quality and at the rate they set.

For an assembler, there’s no room for creativity. The mind is separated from the body. Doing the job requires the body not the mind, and so the mind just exists. There are times though, in some of these routine days, when the mind does link up with the body. At such times, for those involved, mind and body become alive — the plant becomes alive. It is an industrial action that the two are fused.

The power of the employer is felt in the daily work-routine and felt just as much when industrial action is being used to improve some aspect of that routine. There is some power up there, and the workers don’t have it. That is to say, normally they don’t have it. But when, collectively, the workers become determined to change something, they become powerful. Power then is, apparently, a conditional thing. It resides where it does because everybody concerned considers it right and proper that it should. It is a collection of daily practices and thoughts about these practices which express the class character of the relations between those involved in the vehicle industry.

The object of this essay is to detail some of the specifics of class relations and to highlight the importance of workers’ organisation on the shop-floor as a flexible and effective tool in their mediation. The focus throughout will be on the people at the workshop floor to try to understand something of their daily working life and some of the responses they make to it. Other important details will be mentioned only
where they serve that purpose. Therefore little attention will be paid to the structure of the industry or the manner in which the main working-class institutions (the trade unions) interact at the state or federal level with the employers inside or outside the Arbitration Commission.

II
The over-riding management consideration in vehicle-manufacturing and assembly plants is that actual production should meet the targeted production level on any given day. It is the target level in combination with the division of labour which is the bane of existence of the vehicle assembler. The assembly line, which usually attracts the blame for the problems of the industry, is merely the scapegoat. By focusing on the technology of the line attention is diverted away from the social system of the factory, of who controls whom to do what, when and how. The assembly line, which is a technologically primitive mechanism, facilitates that control. It does so by precisely locating, and limiting the mobility of, the assembly workers within the plant and specifying the universal minimum rate at which they work. The target affects workers in the manufacturing plants too. For example, the target at Broadmeadows determines the daily output of the presses producing sheet-metal body panels miles away at Ford’s Geelong plant. A loaded train leaves Geelong each night to arrive at Broadmeadows by the following morning. One plant is dominated by assembly lines and the other is not.

The target
Both are dominated by the target. The power of the target is not confined to the plants of the major companies. The vehicle industry is characterised by a large number of small satellite companies supplying components to the industry such as wheel rims, wiring harnesses and bumper bars. Although they may be geographically remote from the assembly plants the target reaches out and touches them too.

The greater the division of labour the smaller the task; the smaller the task the smaller the amount of time needed to complete it and the faster the assembly line can be driven. But with smaller tasks more people are needed to produce the finished article hence greater division of labour, faster line speeds, longer lines, larger workforces and bigger factories tend to go together. And so it is that at Broadmeadows in Victoria some 3300 people, typically, produce some 350 vehicles per day on a job-cycle time of about 1½ minutes whereas at the West Heidelberg plant of Renault some 450 people produce about 40 vehicles per day, on a job-cycle time of about 15 minutes. The division of labour and the de-skilling of the worker tend to go together with two effects:

(i) The education level of new employees is lowered, thereby broadening the unskilled base from which the employer can find “spare parts” to labour on the assembly line.

(ii) The more these processes occur the wider the scope for the introduction of industrial robots.

Skill and responsibility
At the same time, there is a contradictory tendency: the companies’ marketing strategies, in widening the range of vehicles and increasing the number of options available, mean that in any one eight-hour shift a line worker could be required to install quite different items of equipment on to one of several basic vehicle models. Hence there is an increasing need for alertness and flexibility on the part of the employee, and in these circumstances the VBU, the union which has coverage of most of the workers in the industry, has been successful in having the Federal Conciliation and Arbitration Commission (CAC) accept the argument that such factors have “required increased skill and responsibility in the work of assemblers, welders and metal finishers”.

With the introduction of a new model the employees experience the following three phases of the drive to achieve the target with each phase producing its own particular pressures: phase 1, the drive for volume; phase 2, the drive for quality; phase 3 the drive for efficiency.
Initially the work force has to learn how the new model goes together and what the parts look like. During this learning period the main requirement is to see that completed vehicles come off the line, that is, “to get volume”.

As the new model is introduced the foremen/forewomen will be required to work out how the work of their sections can be performed and how many employees they'll need to do it. While car bodies are coming down the line it will be the task of the leading hands to instruct the line workers how to do their respective jobs. If the line workers don't speak English (or the language of the leading hand) then the instruction proceeds by way of signs and gestures. There are many workers in the industry who speak little or no English. The VBU has been concerned about the issue and has been pressing the vehicle companies for the past five years to provide paid time off work for employees to learn English. The companies continue to refuse the claim. It was only last year that agreement was reached and then with only some of the companies, that international safety symbols be used in Australian vehicle plants. Apart from the importance of English for safe-working, let alone the essentially human aspect of being able to speak to, and understand the people around you, the multiplicity of vehicle options now available means that the cars coming down the line won't all be exactly the same. The particular differences will need to be read by the line-worker from the computer-printed job card attached to each car. An inability to read English could mean that a foreman/woman would have to re-allocate his/her staff and perhaps upset work routines and work relationships that have taken some time to develop. If the foreman/woman has no English-reading employee who can be switched he/she will try to obtain one from another section. But employees are often reluctant to go to a new section in surroundings that are new to them under the control of supervisors they may not know. Perhaps more importantly, they will be required to achieve almost immediately, and maintain for the entire shift, the level of output of the other workers in front of and behind them in the production process. While for some employees, being switched to a new job, perhaps in a different section, would be a welcome relief, for others it only adds to the pressure and is therefore resisted.

Whereas in phase 1 the object is to obtain finished vehicles, during phase 2 much more attention is paid to the quality to the finish produced. Phase 3, the drive for “efficiency” is the speed-up phase. This is the period when the time-and-motion-study men arrive at the shop floor with stopwatch in hand. Their task is to reduce the number of employees without losing volume or quality. To call it efficiency is a bad joke. Assuming corporate optimism about the trend of vehicle sales, corporate profits depend on two main factors: 1) having the productive capacity to meet demand; 2) reducing costs of production wherever possible.

Productive capacity cannot be achieved overnight. There are long lead times involved in the design, construction, testing, and installation of new production equipment. Any particular plant management might not be able to do much about updating the plant’s productive capacity; such expenditure might have to take its place in the global carve-up of corporate funds. But where the local management can make its contribution to global profit is in reducing the labour content of its cost of production. In other words, they're stuck with the plant but they can off-load the workers! And that's where the time-and-motion-study people come in.

Reducing the cost of production is not confined to them. In the design departments of the corporation, engineers are continually searching for ways to use less labour and less capital in the production of a car. And they are successful. When Chrysler’s Valiant was in full production at the Tonsley Park plant in Adelaide in the 1960s it was taking something of the order of 70 hours to produce a complete car. As the fuel crisis began to bite and buyers showed an increasing preference for smaller four-cylinder cars Chrysler began to produce
the Centura, then the Sigma, from the same plant. But the materials used in production and the way they could be assembled meant that the Sigma could be produced in approximately 25 hours. Production time for the Colt is expected to go down to 19½ hours. By being in the plant for less time, each completed vehicle in 1981 uses much less of the manufacturer’s capital stock and labour than it did in 1965. The jobs are simpler and can be done much more quickly.

III

In an assembly plant there is a marked contrast between the situations faced by those working on moving production lines and those faced by the skilled tradesmen such as electricians and fitters who maintain the plant. The contrast is especially evident where these latter employees are involved in modifications to tooling.

The need for such modifications will usually become evident through the inspection system which will reveal, for example, some unsatisfactory fit between body panels, involving the assembler on the line in spending more than the allotted time for the job, thus crowding the employee on the next work station. A white-collar draughtsman/woman and a blue-collar fitter would soon be put onto the job; a foreman/woman would not normally be present. In the interests of keeping close control over the work of each employee and thereby ensuring that the work was being done as efficiently as possible the foreman/woman could, of course, instruct the skilled workers to do the job in a certain way. The responsibility for it would shift then to the foreman/woman leaving the workers with little freedom to plan.

The degree of freedom has important implications for both employee and employer. For the employee it allows him/her to put his/her own order onto his/her own particular job, to exhibit to himself/herself at least his/her particular skills. The job is his/her domain and he/she is the controller in that domain. This is in marked contrast to his/her role as servant in any other relations he/she has with the employer. The role of servant, the do-as-you’re-told role, is clear from the moment he/she walks past the employer’s security guard at the gate as he/she enters the plant in the morning.

From the time he/she punches the Bundy clock he/she is “theirs” to do with as “they” please. Never mind the purpose of what he/she is asked to do, never mind whether or not it makes sense, just do it. “Their” plant, “their” rules. But his/her job, his/her rules. That’s different!

Perhaps this is hardly worth becoming excited about. After all, when the fitter lifts his/her head he/she will be aware again that he/she is in a plant of a multi-national vehicle producer and his/her degree of freedom will appear pitifully small. Nevertheless, as shown earlier, it will be more than the production line worker has!

IV

For the employer, any freedom the employee has in the doing of the job lessens the employer’s control over the operation of the entire plant. From the employer’s point of view the employee might, in exercising his/her degree of freedom, actually perform his/her job in the least costly way but on the other hand he/she might not. The uncertainty surrounding the question can be lowered by reducing the amount of work and constraining the kind of work the employee is required to perform. This implies both the substitution of machine tools for human labour and the simplification of production machinery so that defective parts are not repaired but are simply scrapped and replaced. Taking the above course might not be the least costly from the employer’s point of view but it does increase the predictability of, and thus the employer’s control over, the plant-wide operation. The implications of predictability for budgeting, for materials supply, for production scheduling, for delivery of finished vehicles to new-car salesrooms and ultimately for cash flow and for profit are obviously important.

Aside from the technical/economic
implications considered above there are industrial/political implications of employees having any freedom to move about the plant, which are even more important to the employer. Such freedom could be the basis on which events such as lunch-time union mass meetings are organised, and from which could flow interruptions to production far more serious and far more unpredictable than any deriving from the technical considerations mentioned earlier. The experience gained by the workers in engaging in on-the-job collective action is invaluable in shaping the way they handle future industrial problems with the employer. The employer, of course, realises this and does whatever he/she can do prevent such experience being gained.

V

The “Gnatenko case” illustrates some of the points from the previous sections. Fedor (Ted) Gnatenko, at the time of the incident described below was a tool-maker at GMH, Elizabeth, South Australia, and had been employed by the company for over 20 years. He was sacked on 20 November 1974 for taking part in an unauthorised union meeting at the plant on the same day. As with most industrial disputes this didn’t arise “out of the blue” but was one of the more visible manifestations of a continuing series of events.

The principal element in the situation was probably the fact that in the latter half of 1974 motor vehicle sales were sluggish. By the middle of October, Elizabeth workers reckoned GMH had 40,000 vehicles “on the grass”. In these circumstances one obvious move would have been for the company to lay-off production workers. While this had often been done in the industry, it was a move which always brought much political disfavour and soured relations with the unions, both officially and at the plant-floor. A better move from the company’s point of view would have been for some group of workers to go on strike. But how can an employer precipitate a strike? Sacking a leading shop-floor activist is one way. The strike (which would be almost certain to follow) would provide the pretext for laying-off a large number of workers. This way the blame would be shifted and, moreover, another opportunity would be created to set the unions squabbling amongst themselves. This was the better strategy, but to analyse it requires some understanding of the pattern of unionism in the industry and the institutionalised forms of conflict accommodation created by the State. Thus we will be looking at the situation at three inter-penetrating levels: the relations in production relations between the union organisations and the industrial arbitration bodies.

Ted Gnatenko

The company had plenty of scope for a sacking: some 1500 workers had attended the November 20 meeting and of course Gnatenko was amongst them. He was unique. As convenor of the AMWU shop-stewards he was co-ordinator of stewards activities in a union which organised at the shop level around a strong shop-stewards system. His 20 years of working for the company, his continuous involvement in union activities both on and off the job and his some-time membership of the Communist Party of Australia meant he was a man of considerable relevant experience. Being convenor of the AMWU brought him into contact with shop-stewards of other unions on the job and amongst them and their members he was widely-known, popular and highly respected. In addition, his being Bulgarian by birth with a fluency in several languages made him someone who could, and did, communicate with many of the foreign-born workers who made up the bulk of the assembly-line workforce.

So from the company’s point of view Gnatenko’s sacking could have been expected to produce a strike by certain key workers. It was more than possible, too, that, by making Gnatenko the target, his standing in the shop would lead to strong feelings by the VBU production workers and members of the other trades’ unions, that they should show solidarity with the AMWU and go out too. Moreover, if his sacking could be made to
stick the company would be well rid of a most capable unionist.

The second element in the situation points up the complexity of inter-union relations and the tensions with which the workers at the plant had to deal; nevertheless it is difficult to estimate the degree to which events were influenced by it. In March 1974 tool-and-cutter grinders, members of the Australasian Society of Engineers (ASE) and the AMWU employed by GMH at Fishermen’s Bend in Victoria, struck for about a month in support of a claim for increased wages. In consequence, VBU members on production in the Body Assembly division at Elizabeth were stood-down for about three weeks. During May and June members of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) at Elizabeth struck for about six weeks in support of a wage claim. Again VBU members at Elizabeth were stood down, this time for about four weeks. In other words, VBU members lost seven weeks pay because of disputes they were not involved in and from which they could receive no benefit.

Following these events some VBU officials began agitating for a closed shop agreement, ie that all workshop employees should be members of the VBU. When the Gnatenko sacking took place it would have been reasonable to expect that at the very least there would have been a plant-wide strike of AMWU members. Again VBU members would have been stood down and again would have lost money. The Gnatenko sacking involved the important issue of victimisation. Nevertheless it is possible that some VBU officials were keen to be rid of a situation in which, with their union the biggest in the industry and potentially the most powerful, it was seen to be, particularly by the members, the most quiescent. One way to bring this to a head, which would have led to very substantial financial and other long-term gains for the VBU, would have been to let the expected AMWU strike over Gnatenko run its course. At its conclusion VBU officials would use the lost wages of their members to mobilise a VBU strike around the demand that the company recognise the VBU as the sole union in the industry, and until that was achieved there would be no return to work.

The third element in the series of events surrounding Gnatenko’s sacking is more directly tied in to the company’s production planning. The workers at Elizabeth had become concerned at what they understood to be a company decision to phase-out production of the Australian-made Torana and launch instead a Japanese-made car, the Gemini. The vehicle would be manufactured in Japan and imported to Australia in a completed knocked down (CKD) form, ready for local assembly. From normally reliable sources in senior management the workers reckoned that, across Australia, 5000 employees would lose their jobs if the company’s plans went ahead. Gnatenko was quoted as saying that “1000 workers might go from Elizabeth”.5 On this issue the company had done nothing to allay the workers’ fears. Rather than scotch the rumours altogether, its officials told a meeting of Elizabeth shop-stewards that “only 15,000 cars”6 would be imported, not 50,000 as the workers thought. In addition, they gave “only vague replies to union enquiries concerning employment after Christmas”.7

Plant Committee

It was against the foregoing background that the Combined Shop Stewards’ Committee representing members of the VBU, the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen’s Association (FEDFA) and the AMWU called a lunch-time meeting of all members on November 20th to discuss the employment consequences of the introduction of the Gemini. About 1500 workers turned up to the lawn area within the plant, the place where mass meetings were usually held. Also present were officials of both the VBU and the AMWU. Before the meeting Gnatenko was warned by a company official that if the meeting were to take place he would face serious consequences; he was requested to call the meeting off. His response was that the decision to hold the meeting was made by more than 50 stewards on the shop committee (of which he was but one) and any
decision to cancel would have to be taken by either that committee or the mass meeting itself. It went ahead and the first item of business was a report on the company’s warning to Gnatenko; the second was the question of where the rest of the meeting should be held.

It was moved and seconded from the floor and unanimously decided that the meeting should proceed forthwith right where it was. After some discussion the meeting adjourned without any decision being reached. At 3.30 that same afternoon Gnatenko was sacked. The following morning an 8 am stopwork meeting of the AMWU’s 400 members at Elizabeth decided to stop work for 24 hours in protest. For the unions involved the issue was serious since it could flow to all GMH’s operations in Australia.

It put the workers at Elizabeth, and more particularly the AMWU members, in a powerful, but politically and industrially difficult, position. Nevertheless the support of the AMWU’s official apparatus for the shop committee was strong with the SA state secretary, John Scott, asserting, following the 24-hour strike, that “the shop committee would be organising whatever follow-up action was required”. Nevertheless the matter was not left entirely with them. Two days after the sacking Scott filed an application in the South Australian Industrial Commission for Gnatenko’s reinstatement and engaged a QC to present the case. On the same day the union held a lunchtime meeting of its 200 members at the company’s Woodville, Adelaide plant. By this time the Minister for Labour and Industry in South Australia, Mr McKee, had said publicly that he hoped Gnatenko would be reinstated and that “it (was) natural for people in the industry to want to discuss matters concerning their future, and one would not have expected the company to take such drastic action over a lunchtime meeting in view of the problems confronting the industry”.9

The company’s response to the union application was to apply to the Supreme Court for an order prohibiting the S.A. Industrial Commission from hearing the matter. The order was duly given on 21 January 1975 by Chief Justice Bray who referred the matter to the Full Court. Bray’s order was met with an immediate walk off the job by 20 AMWU stewards at Elizabeth who met at the union’s city office the following morning and then demonstrated outside the Supreme Court. They sent the following resolution to Bray:

This emergency meeting of the GMH Elizabeth AMWU shop stewards committee, meeting with the full approval of the State Council, registers its strong protest at the action that GMH management has decided to take to prevent the case of the dismissed AMWU convenor Ted Gnatenko being heard by the State Industrial Commission. On many occasions and in relation to many issues in the past representatives of GMH management have urged us to take our case to arbitration. On this issue, when that is precisely what we have done, the company is demonstrating its hypocrisy by taking every legal step to prevent the case from being heard and the question resolved speedily.

Direct action

It was two months before the Full Court heard the matter and when it did, on 27th March, it decided in favour of GMH. With that decision AMWU members at Elizabeth and Woodville re-introduced an industrial tactic they had used so successfully before — the “guerilla” strike.12 The direct action began on Wednesday, 9th April, when 22 workers from the maintenance, jig, body and welding sections at Elizabeth went out at noon on what they said was an indefinite strike. At 2 pm that same day 12 workers in the tool sharpening area at Woodville walked off the job. Contrary to expectations strikers from
both plants returned to work the following morning. On the 10th April, three maintenance fitters walked off the job at Elizabeth when two assembly lines broke down. The company thereupon stood down 130 production workers (VBU members) and had no idea when the conveyors might be repaired. The fitters decided to do repairs on the night shift of the same day so the Vehicle Assembly Plant (VAP) could begin work at the normal starting time of 7.30 am the next day. A joint meeting of stewards from the VBU, AMWU and FEDFA was held on the 10th April and endorsed the metal workers’ actions. While all these actions were being discussed and decided on at the shopfloor level, the State branches of the various unions were indicating their support. For example, the walk-off by the three AMWSU maintenance fitters on 10th led to the company’s approaching the VBU to see whether that union would allow any of its fitter members on night shift to do repairs normally done by AMWU men. The VBU refused and the VBU State executive pledged its support and endorsed the actions of the AMWU in its efforts to get Gnatenko reinstated. The State officials of the ASE, the rival union to the AMWU, also rejected the company’s approach.

Shop-floor action

In the face of this build-up of shop-floor action and inter-union support the company continued to maintain its November 1974 firmness. Notices posted in the Elizabeth plant on the 10th April said: “The company has again advised the AMWU that it will not enter into any discussion regarding the reinstatement of Mr Gnatenko.”

As the dispute proceeded the workers at the shop-floor continued to disrupt production. They were not prepared to be fobbed off by company declarations that it would not talk. They had won against similar attitudes by GMH in the past. They also knew that as this struggle moved into the courtroom and out of their hands, it would be particularly important to let their feelings be known. There is considerable feeling throughout much of Australia’s trade union movement that decisions in court rooms reflect the power struggle in the office or plant. This is not to say that decisions of Industrial Courts or Commissions are irrelevant — far from it! It is rather to acknowledge that, often, justice is a matter of power. The aim of the shop-floor disruption was to get the company to talk. At the time of the Gnatenko sacking there existed in the Award a stand-down clause which provided that “The Company shall have the right to deduct payment for any day an employee cannot be usefully employed because of a strike or through a breakdown in machinery or a stoppage of work by any cause for which the Company cannot reasonably be held responsible”.

Lightning strikes

This could have been expected to be a brake on industrial action but, in practice, as the following section makes clear, the workers at the shop floor found a way around the clause. The main tactic was the short-duration, on-the-job, lightning strike first in one section of the plant then in another; as one group resumed work another would stop. A typical incident would be as follows: the four VBU members spot welding in the side-gates section would fail to resume work after the morning tea break and would stay off the job for about two hours, ie at 11.30 am they would re-appear, pick up their welding guns and set to work. While they were off the job their workmates down-the-line from them could continue to work until stocks were exhausted and then they would stop too. When the welders returned perhaps two or three painters in the spray painting booth would leave the job, and the line feeding them would have to stop. The production superintendent had no idea which section would be on strike next, for how long or how many employees would be involved. Because those who were on strike, and those who had no materials to work with did not actually leave the plant they were able to circulate amongst the other workers and tell them what was happening. All this added to the high level of co-ordination between the shop stewards in the various sections and made for the constant monitoring and review of the
situation by the workers. The effects of this sort of industrial action on production were severe. Although this form of action had been determined by the combined shop committee involving both production and maintenance workers, it did not lend itself wholly to centralised co-ordination by the combined shop committee executive. The VBU stewards were much more familiar than the maintenance stewards with the way the process of production was integrated, and therefore knew the strategic points, and so they were given the authority of the combined shop committee to plan and set the strikes in motion.

**Thirty per cent Over-award**

This form of action was not new to the workers at Elizabeth. In the early 1970s they had launched a campaign to force GMH to convert the existing over-award payments, into an all-purpose rate and to remove all the penalties attached to these over-award payments. This campaign became known as the 30 per cent over-award campaign, and the series of lightning stoppages resulted in not one completed vehicle coming off the assembly line for the whole of one working week. Vehicles came off the line, on wheels, with engines in, but each one had parts missing, enough to prevent it going to the dealer's sale room. In this period the lightning strikes were being staged all over the plant but the particular circumstances of each work section required that tactics be tailored to suit. For example, in the VAP the situation was different from other sections, because there, bodies could be stockpiled off the line on trolleys and could be pushed onto the line if there was an interruption to production in the body building area or the paint shop, for example. This meant the VAP could be kept going independently of these other lines. Because the VAP was working two shifts at this time, i.e. a day and an afternoon shift, there was every chance that the workers on day shift could deplete the entire stock of bodies thus making it unnecessary for the workers on the afternoon shift to clock on. It was here, especially, that the workers were in danger of giving the company the chance to use the stand-down clause.

As mentioned above, if, at the time a new shift was to begin, there were insufficient materials available to keep the shift going for the eight hours, the company could decline to start them. The stewards in the other shops therefore had to ensure that on any particular day, there was enough body stock available for the VAP afternoon shift to start and in addition, if they put on a lightning strike, there would still be enough stock for the following day's day-shift to start. This all required a good knowledge of the production process and a nice balance between the needs of stock buildup and the effects of industrial action. But they did it, for a week — everybody employed and no saleable vehicles produced! The workers who engaged in the lightning strikes had their wages docked by the company but on-the-job collections fixed that. Ultimately the campaign had the desired effect; the 1974 GMH Award set a new standard in wages. The arbitrary nature of wage elements such as merit money and attendance bonus was eliminated by being written into the Award. No longer were these payments tied to whether or not the employee had kept his/her nose clean with the foreman/woman. As such payments were formerly approximately 30 per cent of the weekly wage, to have them assured was a significant gain.

**A shop-floor campaign**

This campaign was important because it was initiated by workers at the shop-floor. The full-time officials soon came in behind it but because they did not actually work in the industry and therefore were not subject to the arbitrariness of the penalties they quite misread the feeling of the membership in the run-up to the 1974 Award negotiations. Whereas officials were pressing for Award wage increases in their discussions with the membership as to what should be in the log of claims, the membership was insisting that a priority claim was that the penalties had to go.

It was with this sort of experience behind them that the workers at Elizabeth launched
into their industrial action to have Gnatenko reinstated. They realised it would be a battle of wits as to whether or not they would lay themselves open to the company’s use of the stand-down clause. They realised it was just another weapon in the company’s industrial arsenal, which, like all the rest, would be used to divide, intimidate, cajole, entice or reward the workers and could be used whether or not the company had alternative work available. As can be seen from the 30 per cent campaign the shop floor workers demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the production process and could be expected to offer an informed view of any company claim about available work. The acting secretary of the VBU at the time, Mr D Foreman, referred to the stand-down clause’s control implications when on Friday, 11th April, he announced, with respect to the stand-down of 130 workers on the previous day, “the union members dispute the company’s claim that they could not have been gainfully employed”. Foreman was giving notice that the union would be lodging a claim in the Arbitration Commission for payment for the time stood down.

At this stage Mr Laurie Carmichael (Assistant National Secretary of the AMWU) asked Mr Clyde Cameron (then Federal Minister for Labour) to arrange for a member of the Federal Conciliation and Arbitration Commission (CAC), to be made available to bring the parties together. Bringing in the Federal Government did make it that much more difficult for the company to continue to refuse to talk and siting the discussions in the CAC was consistent with the company’s original contention that the SA Industrial Commission had no jurisdiction and that the CAC was the appropriate forum.

The proceedings began before Commissioner Clarkson in Adelaide on Monday, 14 April 1975, and continued for five days. On the Monday Clarkson directed GMH “to reconsider its refusal to discuss (Gnatenko’s) re-instatement”. On the following day more than 300 AMWU members at Elizabeth walked off the job at 8.30 am for a 24-hour strike, many of them going to the CAC hearing to witness proceedings. On the Friday Clarkson varied the GMH Award so as to enable employees covered by that Award to come under the reinstatement provisions of the South Australian Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act. The variation was made retrospective to November 1st of the previous year, ie before Gnatenko was sacked. Two and a half weeks later, on May 8th, GMH appealed, and the very next day the AMWU’s shop stewards in Elizabeth held a lunchtime meeting to discuss what they would do next.

Closer organisation

The recent events had broadened the dispute, and the unions were quick to see that Clarkson’s decision applied not only to Gnatenko but represented a significant advance for all GMH’s employees. It constituted a turning point in that now all employees stood to lose if the company’s application was successful. Stewards from the VBU and FEDFA joined with AMWU stewards in a meeting a lunch-time on the following Monday, 12th May, outside the plant gates. In other words, at the shop-floor level workers from those three unions were moving back into a combined form of organisation. The lunch-time stewards’ meeting decided to send a delegation of stewards from the three unions to tell company officers that, because of the appeal being lodged, they could expect lightning strikes. The strikes followed while the newspapers were given, and published the Unions’ case. Subsequently (March, 1976) the High Court rejected the GMH appeal.

The purpose of this account has been to show some of the details of the day-to-day situation of both production and maintenance workers in the vehicle industry. The details will differ from plant to plant and company to company and will bear the marks of particular individuals but, by and large, the size of plants, the number of people involved, the pressure of work and, particularly, the way the workforce is controlled, all operate to produce the kind of effects described.

Cases like Gnatenko’s or a 30 per cent
campaign don't bob up every day, nevertheless there is almost always some industrial matter at issue in the plant. Even for these smaller issues the workers are better able to handle them if they have some form of shop-floor organisation, some group of colleagues to whom, on the job, they can turn for advice and support, some group of colleagues in whom can reside the accumulated wisdom of the plant's industrial experiences. A Gnatenko case makes the need for such an organisation even more compelling.

The ability and the preparedness of the shop-floor organisation to plan and act was the principal reason the Gnatenko sacking didn't stick. Another significant reason for the workers' success was the extent to which the union officials supported the Elizabeth workers.

The implications of the situation of the Elizabeth workers are highly significant. An industrial struggle throws light on facets of the employee/employer relationship previously unrecognized by many employees including the lengths to which the company is prepared to go to defend its interests and the relative power of the employer and employees. Most importantly, it shows the possibilities of challenging the employer's power once the workers are resolved to do so. An industrial struggle shatters the superficial calm of the factory, jerks people out of their privatised industrial life, and places a premium on thought and discussion. In so doing it increases consciousness, perhaps generating class consciousness, and throws into relief the relative importance of the forces of production and the relations of production. But such questions do not even arise if, in the first place, there has not been developed a self-acting organisation at the work-shop floor.

NOTES

1 The writer is indebted to many people. In particular to Albert and Gloria Laird whose determination to fight has been an inspiration; to Bob Connell for encouragement and patience; to Dominic Foreman, Ted Gnatenko, Dick Grozier, the AMWSU vehicle-industry shop stewards in Adelaide, and especially to Brian Mowbray.

2 The information was gained over several years by visits to nine vehicle-manufacturing or assembly plants in Australia, discussion with shop-floor workers and management personnel in the plants, off-the-job discussions with officials of the Amalgamated Metal Workers' Union (AMWU) which, after its amalgamation with the Federated Shipwrights and Ship Constructors' Association of Australia, became the Amalgamated Metal Workers' and Shipwrights' Union (AMWSU).


5 The Advertiser, 9/11/74, p.3.

6 The Advertiser, 9/11/74 p.3.

7 Ibid

8 The Advertiser, 22/11/74, p.3.

9 Ibid

10 Ibid

11 The Advertiser, 22/1/75, p.6.

12 The following section draws heavily on The Advertiser of the period.


15 Gnatenko was active in this campaign and such activity was part of the "continuing series of events" referred to earlier in this section.


17 The Australian, 15/4/75, p.3.

18 This Act is the only legislation in Australia which can order an employer to reinstate a sacked worker if the dismissal was harsh, unjust or unreasonable. To justify the sacking, an employer can be ordered to "open the books" for examination. The inclusion of the Acts as part of the Award was therefore of very great significance.