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## Loyalty and middle class at stake in the General Motors strikes, Flint (Michigan), Summer 1998

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## discussion paper

FS I 00 - 301

### **"Loyalty" and "middle class" at stake in the General Motors strikes, Flint (Michigan), Summer 1998**

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Delphine Corteel and Judith Hayem

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## **Abstract**

In June and July 1998, the United Auto Workers Union (UAW) engaged Flint General Motors workers in one of the longest strike to take place lately in United States. Officially, the strike was launched on Health and Safety issues, as globalisation and relocation of the company were non strikeable ones in the bargaining contract.

Still, the issue of globalisation and the relationships between the firms and their employees, and the firms and the countries in which they are settled, were clearly at the heart of the conflict.

This paper is based on the empirical data we collected in Flint (Michigan) at the beginning of August 1998. It is the result of the individual interviews we conducted with the workers and UAW representatives about their own ideas on the situation. It focuses on what workers think by identifying the words and categories they themselves use to analyse the situation.

The paper looks at the national contract signed by GM, Delphi Automotive Systems Corp. and UAW in late September 1999 as an attempt to respond to the real issues addressed by the strikers, that neither GM nor the union could face in 1998 because of juridical reasons ruling negotiations agenda.

## **Zusammenfassung**

Im Juni / Juli 1998 hat die United Auto Workers Union (UAW) die Mitarbeiter von General Motors in Flint in einen Streik geführt, der zu den längsten Konflikten in der jüngsten amerikanischen Arbeiterbewegung gehört. "Gesundheit" und "Sicherheit am Arbeitsplatz" galten als offizieller Streikgrund, da laut gültigem Tarifvertrag gegen Globalisierung und Verlagerung der Produktion in Billiglohnländer nicht gestreikt werden durfte. Dennoch standen Fragen wie Globalisierung, die Beziehungen zwischen den Unternehmen und ihren Arbeitnehmern sowie das Verhältnis zwischen den Unternehmen und den Ländern, in denen sie Produktionsstätten haben, eindeutig im Mittelpunkt des Konflikts.

Das Papier basiert auf empirischen Daten, die wir in Flint (Michigan) Anfang August 1998 erhoben haben. Die Daten sind das Ergebnis unserer Einzelgespräche mit streikenden ArbeiterInnen und UAW-VertreterInnen über ihre eigene Analyse der Situation. Der Schwerpunkt des Artikels liegt auf den Aussagen der ArbeiterInnen, das heißt, was sie selber denken, in welche Worte sie ihre Gedanken kleiden und welche Kategorien sie verwenden, mit denen sie die Situation begreifen.

Ein Jahr nach diesen langen und schwierigen Konflikten, im September 1999, haben UAW, GM und Delphi einen neuen, nationalweit gültigen Vertrag abgeschlossen. In dieser Studie wird er als ein Versuch betrachtet, eine Antwort auf die realen Streitfragen und Probleme des Sommers 1998 zu finden, die die Tarifparteien zu dem damaligen Zeitpunkt aus vertraglichen und juristischen Gründen nicht bewältigen konnten.

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*„In the years to come, we shall encourage our suppliers to locate closer to Flint“*

*Charles W. Sash, President of Buick Motor Company, 1910.*

*„General Motors holds that the basic interests of employers and employees are the same. However, at time employees and the management have different ideas on various matters affecting their relationship. The management of General Motors is convinced that there is no reason why these differences cannot be peacefully and satisfactorily adjusted by sincere and patient effort on both sides.“*

*Agreement between UAW and the General Motors Corporation, November, 2, 1996. Introduction.*

## 1. Introduction

On September 29, 1999 General Motors, Delphi Automotive Systems Corp.<sup>1</sup> and the powerful automobile union UAW<sup>2</sup> reached a tentative agreement on a four years long contract. The „friendly and positive“ negotiations that led to this agreement took place only one year after two bitter and especially costly strikes<sup>3</sup>. The 1999 agreement, rather than the agreement signed in August 1998 which ended those two strikes, actually puts an end to the sequence of events which followed the strikes<sup>4</sup>. This is why today it is particularly interesting to have another look on the strikes of 98 Summer and on the issues at stake, in order to understand what challenges were raised by the recent negotiations.

We went to Flint Michigan at the beginning of August 98. The Flint Metal Center and Delphi East strikes had just come to an end; walk-outs had paralysed most of GM production facilities in North America (27 plants out of 29) for almost eight weeks. We met UAW representatives and GM workers. We asked them what they thought about the strike, and what they expected of it.

We spent one week in Flint conducting 15 workers' interviews based on an open questionnaire. Our study was focused on the workers' own words and on the categories they used to analyse the situation. Our own research deals with contemporary forms of workers' subjectivity in Germany and in South Africa<sup>5</sup>. We

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<sup>1</sup> Delphi Automotive Systems Corp. is the former component division of GM. Since May 1999, Delphi is an independent firm quoted on the Stock Exchange, *The New York Times*, May 25th 1999. The present and future situation of Delphi employees has been a major challenge of the recent negotiations.

<sup>2</sup> UAW : United Automobile Aerospace and Agricultural implement Workers of America.

<sup>3</sup> See for example the article from Michael Ellis for Reuters, 29th September 1999.

<sup>4</sup> See Adam et Reynaud (1978) on the importance of agreements ending work conflicts and their impact on the relationship between employees and employers within the firm.

<sup>5</sup> Delphine Corteel is conducting research in the German car industry on new forms of work organisation and especially on semi-autonomous teamwork, see: Corteel D. (1998) „Flexibilité et post-



examine the meanings workers assign to the word „worker“ in a period marked by important ruptures: cessation of the Marxist concept of the working class as a political and historical subject, major political and historical breakthroughs such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of apartheid in South Africa - that occurred surprisingly without violence - large introduction of new work organisation patterns within plants and changing relationships between firms and territories usually called globalisation. We conduct fieldwork research centred on in-depth interviews with workers, focusing on what they think about workers and factories nowadays. We had never interviewed workers on strike so far. The 1998 Summer situation, especially the remarkable length of the strike, its impact on the entire American economy, as well as the fact that it occurred during a valid contract<sup>6</sup>, acutely stimulated our curiosity.

We will concentrate on GM workers' own form of thinking; we will show how they conceive their relationship to management staff and to the company; and we will show that they are subjectively linked to the strike beyond faithfulness and confidence into trade unions. We will first give some background information on the workers' way of seeing the factories' setting.

## 2. Restructuring, relocation, globalisation

Since the mid 1980s, General Motors Corporation, the world largest car manufacturer, has been conducting an aggressive policy in order to restructure production and to reduce costs. In 1986 Roger Smith decided to close eleven GM plants in North America. Michigan's regional economy, mainly dominated by the car industry and especially by GM, was severely hurt<sup>7</sup>. At the same time GM opened several plants in low-wage countries such as Mexico. At the beginning of the nineties, in order to fight an extremely high level of vertical integration within the company<sup>8</sup> GM created its own components subsidiary -Delphi. At the time of the strike, Delphi plants were still owned by GM. GM put those plants under a great deal of pressure. In times of bad economic performance, they were threatened with closure or sale to an independent parts producer.

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fordisme dans les usines automobile allemandes“, *Allemagne en Chantier*, n° 3. Judith Hayem works on workers' consciousness in the post-apartheid period in South Africa, see: Hayem J. (1999) „Etre un ouvrier ça veut dire remettre debout l'économie de l'Afrique du Sud“, *Les enjeux de l'après-Mandela*, chapitre 8.

<sup>6</sup> Strikes in the United-States last generally longer than in other industrialised countries, partly due to the ability unions have to finance them. Most of them however are contract-negotiation strikes. Strikes almost never take place during the validity period of a contract. (Dunlop and Galenson, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> See the movie *Roger and me* from Michael More, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> Flynn M. (1995) pp. 6-7 „GM pursued a strategy of high levels of vertical integration [...] GM purchased supplier plants and added them to its in-house operations, becoming, and remaining today, the most vertically integrated of the world's major vehicle producers.“

At the beginning of 1998, GM refused to honour the \$180 million commitment in new investments promised to the Flint Metal Center within the framework of the 1996 national contract. It claimed that workers were not competitive and that the trade union refused to review the work rules called „peg rates“. These rules had been introduced by the management a few years earlier in several departments where working conditions were extremely hard. In these departments, wages were partly determined by piece rate and partly by working time. Workers had to produce a determined number of pieces that were equivalent to eight hours of work. No matter the time required; as soon as they reached the quota they could either stop working and be paid for a whole day, or continue to work. Then extra hours were considered as overtime (\$30 for one overtime hour, compared to \$20 for an ordinary working hour)<sup>9</sup>.

Unions and management finally decided to review the contract. Negotiations were resumed, but discussions were unsuccessful. In March, workers gave the UAW the authorisation to call a strike in order to put pressure on the negotiations.

By the end of May, GM received the so called „five-days-letter“ from UAW informing them of the forthcoming strike. Much was at stake at this plant since it was originally slated for production of key stampings and parts for GM's new model-truck, to be assembled in Ontario. Management decided to remove the critical tools for production at Flint Metal Center: the dies. General Motors ordered non-unionised workers to dismantle the machines at night and sent the dies to its plant in Oshawa in order to be sure that the new model-truck would be produced<sup>10</sup>.

On June, 5 (a few weeks before GM 1999 models were launched on the market), the Flint Metal Center (3400 employees) walked out. This stamping plant produced essential parts for all GM assembly factories in North America. A long strike in this particular plant would mean a production stop in most of North American GM factories.

On June, 11 UAW called out a second plant: Delphi East (5800 employees). Local issues such as health, security and production standards were at stake.

The American population warmly supported the strikers (support messages, gifts, participation rallies...)

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<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, workers worked relentlessly during the first hours, without taking any break, in order to reach the quota as quick as possible. They generally reached it after 4 or 6 hours work. They then used to continue to work and got paid for 8 normal hours work and for 2 to 4 hours overtime.

<sup>10</sup> Workers in Oshawa supported their brothers in Flint by refusing to produce anything with the Flint dies. Presses started up again after the dies were back in Flint on the 27th of July.

Flint Metal Center and Delphi East were not the only plants where GM - UAW relationships were at a standstill<sup>11</sup>. Whether Ford and Chrysler seemed to be in reasonably good terms with UAW, GM went through a turbulent period in its relationship with the union. By deciding to call a strike at those particular two plants, the union drew on new forms of production organisation such as just-in-time and the disappearance of stocks to shut down the world largest car producer for several weeks.

UAW officially went on strike over local issues. But it seemed to be calling into question GM policy in a period within which restructuring processes were taking place in the world car industry. This included changes such as introducing a new platform strategy<sup>12</sup>, outsourcing of parts production and placing greater demand on the suppliers (not only for isolated components but for entire systems), numerous plants installation in low wages countries facilitated by free trade agreements such as NAFTA<sup>13</sup>, extension of product ranges in order to cover world market segments, merger processes (Daimler-Chrysler), redefinition of work organisation: flexibilisation and globalisation.

After a six weeks strike, GM surprised all observers by opting for an unusual means of putting pressure on the strikers and on the union. It sought a court injunction against UAW, arguing that both strikes had national consequences and were consequently illegal according to the contract. The judge designated an arbitrator in charge of listening to the adversaries and subsequently of giving a ruling on the strike's legality. Before the arbitrator advertised its decision, GM and UAW came to an unspectacular agreement to close one of the longest strike in the history of the car industry. GM and UAW decided to go back to the terms of the 1996 agreement: the promised investments at Flint Metal Centre would be made, the rules on production rates and overtime would be reviewed, and GM promised not to sell or close Delphi East within the next 14 months. But according to the plan, Buick City a gigantic plant in Flint employing 6000 persons would be closed in 2000<sup>14</sup>.

When we met the workers the final agreement was being reached and they were beginning to go back to work. In the first section we will explain why the strike should have never happened according to the workers, and their profound sadness as they finally decided to walk out. The loyalty and the moral contract that bind GM and the workers together, the co-operation between management and the workforce are the workers' own categories to analyse the situation. Even if, as they point out, GM has had a different policy since Roger Smith has run the company (sections 3 and 4). The reasons they give to explain why GM should maintain plants in Flint are based

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<sup>11</sup> During the strike, workers authorised the UAW to call out a strike in 4 other GM plants: Buick City (Flint, Michigan), Dayton (Ohio), Indianapolis (Indiana), Saturn (Spring Hill, Tennessee). Those plants did not walk out but the negotiations between GM and UAW aimed to solve the problems at the 6 plants all together.

<sup>12</sup> The platform is a common base for the production of several different vehicles.

<sup>13</sup> North American Free Trade Association.

<sup>14</sup> *The New York Times*, July 29th 1998.

on those particular categories (section 5). And it is also from this way of thinking the relationship between the workers and the company, that they criticise GM's relocation policy towards low-wage countries. According their way of seeing things, the following principle should be upheld: the people who make the product should be able to buy the product anywhere (section 6). The last section will contain conclusive remarks about the workers' own categories. It suggests to look back at the 1999 national contract signed by GM and UAW.

### 3. Moral contract and sadness

During our interviews with the workers, we were profoundly struck by their view on the strike. They expressed neither exhilaration nor euphoria, but sadness and the idea that they should never have gone on strike... It is not a statement they cast a posteriori considering the results of the strike. This idea runs from the beginning to the end of the conflict.

*I didn't want to go on strike, but on the other hand, bargaining unit bringing good faith respect, to the people the employer up to their obligations, and broke up the contract and stole the dies, they did that at night when we were on holidays with non union workers. It was like they wanted us to go on strike.<sup>15</sup>*

*GM showed the world its ability to lie, not keeping words. People here believe what you say is what you are, a handshake is a contract and GM showed they manipulate the contract.*

*Workers here expect the truth from the company.*

*What GM said in papers, portraying us like people who don't work or only work 4 hours, they were lying, this is not good management.*

*The strike should never had happened they should have got to work after two days.*

*I felt it was necessary [...]. We had a contract for two years and after 6 months they didn't keep it so why? That's why I went out. [...] It's a principle kind of thing. Unethical. That's wrong, you make a contract and if not happy you put it at the new bargaining time.*

*When we were walking out I was sad. I wouldn't have had to walk out because of lies, promises broken, they broke their contract with the people on the floor.*

*I was profoundly sad that we had come to this.*

*Everybody knows right from wrong. So much of the community joined our side at that time even if they wouldn't have. Carry a picket line was easy for them cause really everybody knows right from wrong, people were there.*

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<sup>15</sup> Italics are extracts from the interviews conducted with General Motors workers in Flint, in August 1998. Those interviews have been transcript word for word during the discussion. Those are the exact words and expressions used by the workers. As we precisely work on words, we chose to keep the workers' speech like we heard it, including possible language mistakes or grammatical errors.

GM workers see their relationship to the company through what they call „*the contract with the people on the floor*“. This expression does not refer to the legal contract which links UAW and the management of the firm. It is a subjective notion and a moral one as well. We contend that it is not a question of feeling betrayed, but that this very notion of a moral contract epitomises their thesis on the situation. To understand what is taking place one must consider managers and workers as engaged in a moral contract which binds their reflection on the situation and therefore their actions afterwards.<sup>16</sup>

The kind of words they use (*truth, lie, right and wrong, ethics and principles*) belongs to a moral vocabulary, which structures their way of thinking the situation. GM and its workers work together and their mere working together seals a reciprocal commitment. They are morally bound to it. The contract implies that both parts mutually acknowledge each other and share a certain number of principles. Here, contract means that to give one's word commits personal integrity: *what you say is what you are / a handshake is a contract*. One cannot come back on the terms of the contract without discussing them again with its partner.

Factory relationships, which are based on the contract, are supposed to be modelled on the commitments given. Those relationships are evaluated according to the following criterion: what is right, or wrong, for the people?

The contractual nature of GM and its workers relationships involves negotiating and discussing. The two parties are supposed to keep their word and believe that their partner says the truth (*good faith*). They discuss together what is to be done. But, in taking the dies away, GM broke all these rules: it took a unilateral step based on dissimulation and lies.

GM came back on its agreement and its promises to invest in Flint, it lied to the media about the workers' working hours, and it also lied pretending to discuss with the trade unions when it was actually taking the dies away. In that occasion, GM neatly swept up the notion of „*contract with the floor*“.

Therefore, the workers wanted to restore the contract. They clearly expressed the rupture of the contract from GM's part. As for themselves, their own category in order to think their relation to the company remains „*the contract*“. Hence, the dilemma they face. Going on strike is contrary to their commitment to work for GM. But, GM is using their moral posture and their confidence that a dialogue does exist between the partners, to deceive them even more (*manipulation, orchestration*). Therefore, they embark on a strike to show their disagreement with what has

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<sup>16</sup> Dennis Rousseaux and other authors have developed a concept of „psychological contract“. The category of a „moral contract“, central to the workers' understanding, is not equivalent to that concept. The „moral contract“ must be taken for what it is: a singular and specific intellectual category, opening the door to the discovery of what workers themselves think as opposed to what the scientists have elaborated.

happened; but they feel „*forced*“, because from their point of view the contract should never have been broken.

The „*sadness*“ the workers expressed at the beginning of the strike revealed their dilemma as well. It conveyed a double renunciation to the contract: GM had broken it; the workers were pushed to come back on their own convictions in order to denounce the attitude of the company.

The statement which reads „I felt it was necessary, (...) I was reluctantly going ahead and the more I went into the more necessary I felt it was even if it as even if not saving job“, renders that ambivalence. When GM steps out of the contract, the only paradoxical solution left to the workers is to step out of it as well, in order to restore it.

When the workers walk out of the factory on June the 5th, they mean to denounce that GM does not live up to its obligations within the moral contract, which from their point of view links the company to its workers.

Nevertheless, the legal reasons UAW has used to lead the strike are: health and safety. The gap between trade union issues and what subjectively drives the workers to cease work is obvious. The departure of the dies cannot be a strikeable issue, according to the legal terms which regulate the right to strike. Moreover, the strike is not a priori, a means that workers favour. Therefore, to understand what was really at stake for the workers during those 8 weeks, and what they precisely mean by *contract*, we must study other statements.

#### **4. Loyalty and profit: a moral and a capitalist vision of the firm**

„*Loyalty*“ is the workers' word to indicate what has been and what should be the relationship between the workers and the management of the company. They told us:

*No trust no loyalty they had 24 years ago towards the co-operation with their employees.*

*My Dad worked for Buick, every year he bought a new Buick. It was his loyalty to the company.*

*If a company treats me right, I'll do anything, but if no loyalty I wouldn't do anything but my assignment. They have that from the top executive, this antagonist attitude against the employees. We're the one who make that company what it is, no loyalty to the community who they are. No loyalty to the community.*

Loyalty in a work relationship consists for management in recognising that the workers are indispensable to the good running of the company. Management must respect them, count them when he talks of the company, and treat them properly. Workers and management work together, it is not an antagonistic relationship but a co-operation.

Reciprocally, the worker's loyalty towards the company consists in doing his best to help it to operate. For instance, to buy a car from GM does not have a capitalist and consumerist meaning only; it is presented as an act subordinated to the notion of *loyalty*. Indeed, supporting the company you work for, by buying the vehicle you build, is another way to contribute to the benefits of this company. As a consumer, buying the car you make also testifies that you trust the quality of your own work as well as your colleagues', because you know they did it the best they could.

A loyal relationship does not create any opposition between the workers and management. Nonetheless, co-operation does not mean that both partners are identical. On the one hand there are the workers, on the other management (*Dad / Buick, they / employees, top executive / employees, Top of corporation / workers*); each of them is clearly identified and acknowledged for what he is and what he brings in particular to the company. It is the very meaning of loyalty.

Workers identify two groups, two distinct collectives, along the lines of a Marxist vision of the firm: capital - management and labour - workers. But, contrarily to the usual vision of classes as involved in a class conflict, GM workers offer a vision where classes exist without the conflict. Far from fighting each other, those two classes must have a loyal relationship and co-operate.

Another specific element of a loyal relationship is that workers and management both personally benefit from this co-operation.

*I try to work for GM for them to make profits because it's profit for me.*

In the above statement, profit is what we call a „multiple word“<sup>17</sup> (Lazarus, forthcoming). There are two meanings of the same word: financial benefits for the firm and another kind of profit - still to be identified - for the workers.

In Flint workers' conception, it is established that:

1- A firm must make profit and everyone must do one's best for it to make the maximum profit.

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<sup>17</sup> Although a single word is used for both meanings, what is thought under profit when workers talk of company's profits and when they talk of their own profit is not identical. Those two meanings cannot be confused, and they are not contradictory either. They are not parts of a whole, one would grasp by summing them. Profit is not a concept it is a „multiple word“.

2- Profit is not made to the detriment of the workers, but with them; consequently, workers as much as management must benefit from it.

This is simultaneously a moral and a capitalist idea of the firm. Loyalty is a specific and original category of thinking. It identifies the subjective space in which workers think what is happening in the factory. It situates the work relationship within a moral commitment. Still, it does not reject the economic rationality of the firm, based on profit, but it is articulated on it. The relationship is not antagonistic, it is a moral contract ruled by the acknowledgement of everybody's work and by a shared profit.

We can now understand how the workers qualify GM's current attitude from within this vision of the firm.

*Moreover, we made them what they are. This town is absolutely dependent on the company. Largest concentration of GM workers is here, in Flint Michigan. If we are so unprofitable why did they become first, how did they make 6.5 Billion dollars? It's corporate greed, what they did. We are competitive, we made them first. [...] Perhaps our cars are better quality it's not because they lower labour cost that the car is going to lower that. They are number one, otherwise other companies would have been number one. Why reduce it per car? [...] Why did you want to compete them on labour cost if you did well anyway? Let's focus on what you did well and focus on that. GM is leader 6.5 millions profits this year. For years on bonuses not let it go. They attack us first? [...] Let's find some ways to save jobs first let's work together. Why first thing to come up is labour cost? Other things to look out, things to address.*

From within their own idea of loyalty; they call GM contemporary policy: „corporate greed“. Greed<sup>18</sup> characterises management will to win more for himself, without considering the people who work for him. This category arises with the end of the loyalty. Management contends that workers have become „unprofitable“: their work does not generate any more profit for the company, therefore labour cost should be reduced to improve the company results. When he calls the workers „unprofitable“, management denies their participation to the success of the company, he erases them. He does so to such an extent, that workers note that in GM current language, words have changed. The word „worker“ itself disappears to be replaced by the words, „labour cost“ or „labour“. The new vision of the company is exclusively financial and money making is the only principle.

Our interlocutors strongly deny this statement.

In the first place, if the company makes profits, then the workers have necessarily contributed to it (*we made them what they are. We made them first*). Even if they do not execute the same tasks and are paid different wages, management and workers work together, everyone in one's own way, to make the

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<sup>18</sup> Workers choose the word „greed“ and not its synonym „avidity“. Greed is indeed one of the seven sins capital, and has a moral connotation.



company what it is. Workers defend the quality of their work as one of the company asset in comparison to its competitors. Moreover, and in coherence with their own understanding of the notions of co-operation and profit, they indicate that, on the opposite, if the company is in trouble, management and workers should manage and assume the problem together.

In the second place, workers denounce GM analysis because it conceives of profit exclusively from a financial and managerial point of view without any regards to the workers' profit. We saw that for the workers, „*profit*“ is not only an economic and financial category, beneficial to management only. It must also remunerate the worker commitment for the company. By taking away their jobs, GM takes away any kind of potential profit for the workers, as it merely takes away their capacity to make a living.

Like „*contract*“, „*loyalty*“ is attached to reciprocity. Management and workers must both subscribe to the notion for it to be efficient. But, the statements indicate that GM does not apply it anymore. Yet, workers do not have any alternative, acknowledging that management has given it up. As for them, they refuse to give up and want to restore the loyalty between the workers and management. They would then be able to try and find out means to keep jobs in Flint, together.

## 5. End of „respect“, a rupture

What happened? The workers indicate that the beginning of the eighties shows a rupture.

*Ford and Chrysler respect the people who work for them, and their leadership and management has respect for the people, whether GM has none. They got no respect for anybody except how much money they're going to make. For the last 15 years it's been like that. People would bring people from the rank the engineer came from college and learnt with the people and in the 80s they brought businessmen out and brought people who had no respect and didn't know the people.*

*The workers they believe in common work, doing a good job, the best of their abilities. [...] They believe in unity and union, they believe in management communication and people are friendly here. Happy no problems happy no problems confident. No difference in the people what is different is corporate structure, they don't know how to bring it down and get competitiveness is like a swear and it's dirty word that's what it is. They don't know how to build the confidence they know how to destroy it. Older people knew how to do that.*

*It started when Roger Smiths early 80s came in. He was a tax accountant, he took over doing corporation in US, no idea about management yet he did it. Like I say I came from the old Fisher plant closed in 85. No loyalty.*

Until the beginning of the eighties, the attitude of the company and its managers towards workers, was marked with respect. From then on, this particular attitude has disappeared. At the company level, to respect workers consist in considering they belong to the company: they work for the company and their contribution to its existence is acknowledged. In simple terms, they are workers in the factory, there must be workers for a factory to operate and that is taken into account.

On the other hand, as individuals they were respected and even consulted by their superiors in the shop floor. The company makes use of their know-how. The terms, *communication*, *friendship*, *trust*, identify the type of relationship induced by this category. *Respect*, is a partners' relationship, coherent with loyalty, co-operation and contract. Respect between workers and management on the floor, between workers and the company in general is the daily expression of those principles, their implementation.

Workers describe how this change in the relationship, has coincided with a new recruitment practice on behalf of GM. GM now recruits businessmen absorbed in money making and the financial running of the factory. They run the company but they do not care for the workers at all.

The disappearance of the *respect* shows that the implementation of the *contract* in daily life has been visibly disrupted for 15 years. But from the workers' point of view, this situation does not imply that their categories are no longer valid. They do not see this new attitude as a definitive change of policy from GM, a change that could require them to think the situation with new categories. They see it as a mismanagement, a parenthesis. They contend the possibility to rehabilitate *contract*, *loyalty*, and *respect*. They show their implementation by other American car makers as a proof<sup>19</sup>.

Now that we identified those central categories of thinking, we can turn to workers' statements on GM's departure towards low wages countries and get a sense of it. Indeed, when the workers tackle the issues of globalisation and production location they do so from within the moral categories we have just analysed.

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<sup>19</sup> We did no fieldwork at Ford nor Chrysler and we do not have any literature on this matter. Nothing allows us to confirm or infirm this statement. Still, it must be said that Ford and Chrysler have undertook ten years ago the restructuring GM is currently working on.

## 6. The people who build the product should be able to buy the product anywhere

When the workers indicate their position on GM departure in order to go and produce in low-wage countries, the articulation between the moral contract and their idea of what the word worker means, appears. The organisation of the categories of thinking we have studied becomes clear as well. It is articulated on two main ideas, the original category of „*working middle class*“ and a statement, which gives its title to the present paragraph.

By naming themselves the „*working middle class*“ GM workers indicate how they envisage the relation between work and salary, the effort you make and what you receive in return.

*I'm working middle class: I make a decent living but I do work hard, the job is labour-intensive. I'm fairly compensated and hope to continue to be fairly compensated.*

They consider that they belong to the middle class because of their high wages, but they insist that it is their working in a factory which justifies this lifestyle.

The workers develop a very singular notion of what being a worker means in the United-States nowadays. Being a worker, is to belong to a social class. But, neither the „working class“ only, referenced as a factory type of job, manual and not intellectual, labour as opposed to capital and including a notion of antagonism; nor the „middle class“ as assigned only to a certain salary level and absencing totally the idea of the worker and the factory, identify what is under the word worker. „Worker“ here is actually the combination of both elements. This Marxist but non antagonist type of conception echoes to what we found under the word „worker“ in previous statements.

The use of the adverb „*fairly*“ underlines that for the workers, this type of wages is a normal compensation for the hard and tedious work they do. This relation between work and the level of salary relies on the original category of „*working middle class*“; it is developed from within the workers' own subjective space with the „*contract*“ as a cornerstone. In the above statement the worker acknowledges the current fragility of this conception of a relation between work and pay by expressing its „*hope to continue to be fairly compensated*“, but it does not consider that this conception has come to an end. The workers indicate their fear to be chased out of that middle class. A threat which echoes to other unions' points of view.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> „*If current trends aren't changed, both agricultural producers and skilled labourers will be forced out of the middle class. We'll be producing under slave contracts and they'll be working for slave wages. We won't be able to afford to buy their vehicles and they won't be able to afford to buy our meat.*“ (Montana butchers flyer)

In the workers' idea, the company is only thought in terms of capitalist profits in so far as that profit has a positive repercussion on the people life. It's what we called a moralo-capitalist vision of the firm. The workers judge GM departure towards low-wage countries in the same terms.

*I like thinking I got many more years in here. It's scary to think those factories are going out of the US for cheaper labour. It's not right for those people, they're not treating those people right.*

*I want Mexican individuals to have a good job but bring them up, their living standards up to ours. They have to make a living also. Pay them the same, when they can afford to buy the vehicles. There's enough work for all countries. GM is taking advantage of this and this is not right. They should bring them up, they work the same hours we do.*

*They want to take out work to China who makes peanuts. They have children making things [...] they want our lifestyle to go down instead of bringing the third world countries to where their life would be good, this I find political.*

*No loyalty at the top of the corporation to the worker anymore. They end up the corporation just close it down get somewhere else, cheaper just go somewhere else. It's the end of American work they will bring those vehicles in US and same standards as what we build here. It's like Nike. The people who build the product should be able to buy the product anywhere.*

Our interlocutors morally condemn GM (*it's not right*), because the company does not leave in order to re-distribute profits, but in order to raise its own financial profits to the detriment of the workers. On the contrary, GM should locate over there with the idea to benefit the country, raise people's lifestyle, allow them to make a living and even live comfortably (*bring up their living / living standards up to ours*). All these concerns rejoin the idea of a social and moral part to play towards the community<sup>21</sup>.

The principles developed by the workers should in their opinion remain true anywhere. In particular the idea that a worker should make a living with his salary. „*To buy what you build anywhere*“ is a test for this functioning. To be the owner of a car guarantees a certain lifestyle, that of the middle class, it implies to win a good salary. This statement recalls Henry Ford precept, but seen from the workers' side this time. No question here, that the workers suggest this as a standard for their salary talking as employee and consumer and not as manager of a firm. Nonetheless, this Fordist reference repeated in the Montana butchers' message of support demands a few comments which will highlight the statement.

In a simplified reading of Fordism, one will recall that Henry Ford wanted to reduce the level of absenteeism as well as the level of turnover in his factories; he wanted to extend the number of his clients so as to increase production and raised workers wage in a developing country in order to do so.

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<sup>21</sup> We did not elaborate on this theme in the present article but it is another idea developed in the interviews.

At that time, the growth of the company has indeed coincided with the rise of the workers' lifestyle. The notions of a shared profit and loyalty were in harmony with the economic conjuncture of that period. The workers' moralo-capitalist vision of the firm was appropriate for the historical situation.

This is no longer the case nowadays. Flexible production has supplanted the economy of scales, and production is being relocated towards the most profitable countries, without any regard for the workers. In the end of the day, the coincidence of Flint workers moralo-capitalist idea of the firm with a certain type of economic growth, a characteristic feature of Fordism in United-States, is the point at stake in that strike. Relocation only benefits to GM. American workers loose their jobs and Mexican workers do not receive a proper living salary: one which would allow them to buy a car, and would open the way for a middle class lifestyle.

Workers note those major changes and their impact on what is happening on the floor. They spot the end of a sequence, but they do not see the situation as a rupture - which it clearly is. They fight for the restoration of a moral contract between GM and its workers, the return of loyalty and respect and the maintenance of middle classes in United States. In the name of those notions, they denounce the departure of GM towards other countries and contends that GM owes them to leave some jobs in Flint.

## 7. Conclusion

The interviews we conducted with General Motors workers at the end of the strike threw a new light on the conflict. They let us reach different conclusions than the ones to which a strict unionist analysis of the conflict would lead. And above all, they allow us to get access to the GM workers' form of thinking and to their particular categories of thinking. From a European point of view, those categories could not fail to surprise us.

According to the workers, *sadness* is the only characteristic category to qualify the strike. Their sadness refers to what should have been the relationship between management and workers. *Loyalty* should have identified this relationship, and this would have permitted to avoid such a strike. *Loyalty* subjectively identifies the factory as a non-conflicting and a moral place. They defend this particular idea of the factory by striking.

*Loyalty* consists in recognising that there are workers and that there are managers in the factory. In other words, there are labour and capital. These are two necessary components to the running of a capitalist plant. Workers and managers have different interests. Nevertheless, the relationship between labour and capital is

neither considered as exploitation, nor as struggle within the GM workers' form of thinking<sup>22</sup>. It is governed by moral rules, rules that lead to do good. Workers take care of managers' good by working at their best in order for the company to make profit. Managers acknowledge workers' efforts and are interested in their good by guaranteeing them a job and a wage that allows them to be part of the middle class. In return, workers buy the cars they produce, in recognition of the good the company lavishes on them as well as the quality of their own work.

The exchange, labour force against wage, does not exhaust the moral relationship between workers and management. It is extended beyond the wage relationship into everyday life and requires a total commitment of the two parties. The company is not even with workers by just paying them a wage, but owes them a certain life security. Likewise, workers do not just put their labour force at the company's disposal, but show their commitment to the company through the brand of the car they drive. *Loyalty* and *morale* organise the vision of the relationship between workers and the company as a succession of exchanges leading to the good of the other party. In those exchanges, the one who gives obliges the one who receives to give back the good received, in a series of gifts and counter-gifts founded in the wage relation but continuing outside the factory<sup>23</sup>. As a result, if the company takes care of the workers' good, it makes sure workers will take care of its good and vice versa. The good of the company can only be reached through the good of the workers.

GM workers propose a possible compatibility between capitalism (growth pattern of firms) and morale (life rules guided by the concern for good and for people's life). The end of a sequence within which capitalism could go with morale is precisely at stake in this strike. There used to be a time, when the growth pattern of firms was conditioned by the settling down of the workers, the diminution of an important absenteeism rate, as well as the transformation of workers into consumers, and consequently it aimed to enhance their living standard. But plant closures in Flint, thousands of layoffs, relocations and a new recruitment strategy for middle management are clear signs given by GM that its growth is no longer compatible with the moral conception deployed by the workers. Workers do not think this end as a rupture. They present the current changes, they describe them, they date their emergence, but they still analyse them with moral categories. Towards American workers as much as towards workers in low-wage countries, the company's attitude is „bad“. They do not deploy new categories to think what is going on since the mid

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<sup>22</sup> Flint workers do not call capitalism into question. This acceptance has always been a major element of the American labour movement: „*Commitment of American labour to liberal capitalism and its rejection of socialism has always been puzzling to those unfamiliar with the American scene. This has been the traditional ideology of American workers and their unions.*“ (Dunlop and Galenson, 1978, p. 84).

<sup>23</sup> See Mauss (1950).

80s, neither do they assign new meanings to the former categories of *loyalty* and *morale*<sup>24</sup>.

Will the conclusion be that Flint workers live in the past in the way they think what a factory is, and that they are unable to size up the actual economic changes? This would probably be as brutal a conclusion as an inaccurate one.

On the one hand, even if they do not draw all the conclusions from the current changes, workers do describe them perceptively. The policy, which GM and other multinationals implement, follows another logic than the one applied in the previous sequence. Firms now take territories' inequalities into account and locate the production where it is financially the most profitable. Concerning relatively simple assembling activities - such as the ones workers perform in Flint - that do not require a highly qualified workforce, the firm's advantage is to locate in a territory where labour is cheap. According to the workers, if the company persists in following this policy, it will endanger the American middle class without allowing the development of a middle class in the low-wage countries. By proposing this analysis, workers echo remarkably the argument developed by Pierre-Noël Giraud in his book: *L'inégalité du monde*<sup>25</sup>. In chapter 4, devoted to the rise of countries which he calls „low-wage countries with technical capacities“, in a section entitled „the end of the middle classes“; he writes: „[...] *the existence of middle classes in rich countries itself is threatened. Classes that rich countries' capitalisms of the first twentieth century not only caused but on which they based their growth.*“<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, our interlocutors develop a series of strong principles about a worker's living standard and a worker's wage linked to their original and unexpected conception of a „*working middle class*“. Even if they do not make strike slogans out of it, nevertheless according to the idea of workers, a worker's wage should allow him to live decently, and hard work should be fairly paid.

Last but not least, the negotiations that began in July 1999 and aimed at reaching a tentative agreement for a national contract, gave the union the juridical framework that was missing the year before in order to support some of the issues addressed by the strikers in 1998. The tentative agreement reached on September 29th 1999 seems to respond to workers' will, that is to restore loyalty, moral contract and the principle that the relationship between GM and its workers extends beyond

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<sup>24</sup> This connection between the economic register and the register of justice and morale are reminiscent of Max Weber's argument in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The German sociologist shows in a very smart way how the Protestant religion, by making the social and economic success one of the signs for the believer's election, its development should have speeded up the implementation of the capitalist rationality. The work (Beruf) was considered a moral duty and the capitalist profit which rewarded it was entrusted with positive and religious meaning. In 1998, the way GM workers morally justify the profit - echoing the religious justification - evokes surprisingly more the Quakers than the golden boys at Wall Street.

<sup>25</sup> P. Giraud is a French economist, the translation of his book's title could be: *The world's inequality*.

<sup>26</sup> Giraud (1996), p. 300.

the strict wage relationship. The 1999 negotiations focused on issues regarding wage and employment security, as well as the limitation of the use of outsourcing and production location<sup>27</sup>.

At the beginning of September 1999, GM announced it was ready to insure life employment to its employees having more than 10 years seniority<sup>28</sup>. As a counterpart, GM required a highly flexible use of the labour force, the possibility to force workers to go and work in other GM plants, the freedom to out-source parts' production, as well as to introduce new working methods in unprofitable plants producing small vehicles. This option has been rejected by the negotiators.

Finally, GM committed not to sell or close any plant organised by UAW during the validity of the contract. Regarding outsourcing, the costing criteria and methodology used to compare the estimated costs of outsourcing versus manufacturing has been changed, now including impact on employment caused by an outsourcing decision. An employment security program has been completed forcing GM to hire new employees as attrition replacement if employment declines beyond a certain level at a rate from one new employee for three departures, to one for one (rates and level being fixed by the contract). Last but not least, former GM employees that became Delphi employees since May 1999 benefit from the same guaranties as GM employees, even if Delphi fails or encounters financial problems; workers are also allowed to flow back to GM when jobs are available. This agreement and the atmosphere of the negotiations seem to lead to a better relationship between GM and its employees.

Within the framework of this new contract, GM is renewing the dialogue with UAW and reinforcing employment security for its actual as well as for its former (Delphi) employees. With this new contract, and at least during its validity, GM management notifies its resolution to validate a certain amount of principles defended by the striking workers in 1998, and to put an end to the period opened in 1986, marked by plant closures and the politics of hire and fire.

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<sup>27</sup> See for example UAW GM and Delphi Report published on the UAW web-page: [www.uaw.org](http://www.uaw.org)

<sup>28</sup> *Detroit Free Press*, September 6th 1999.



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