

## Talking About Auto Work — Or Any Work Under Capitalism — Means Talking About Constant, Brutal Violence

An Interview by Micah Uetracht with Jeremy Milloy, [Jacobin](#), October 23, 2020

Auto work is typically remembered as one of the best industrial jobs a worker could get in postwar America. Less remembered, however, is how absolutely brutal and violent life on the auto factory floor was — and still is.



Auto workers at a Ford Motor Company plant in the 1970s.

The way we typically remember post–World War II industrial work like auto manufacturing might include it being repetitive, maybe unpleasant, but stable and well-paying, making decent lives possible for enormous numbers of workers in the United States. But that’s only part of the story. It also included incredible amounts of violence, as labor historian Jeremy Milloy chronicles in [Blood, Sweat, and Fear: Violence at Work in the North American Auto Industry, 1960-80](#).

Milloy argues that violence on the factory floor saturated the entire production process of American and Canadian auto manufacturing, both in the work itself and in the interpersonal relations among workers and between workers and managers. The book is a strong challenge to prevailing nostalgic notions about the placid conditions of work at the height of twentieth-century industrial America — and raises questions about the omnipresent nature of violence at work under capitalism in any era.

MU

Before I read this book, I shared the prevailing views of mid-century American auto work: good jobs, well paid; maybe monotonous, but stable and decent. I have been thoroughly disabused of at least the notion that these jobs were somewhere between pleasant and benign after reading your book.

JM

That's a historian's job. We're the "well, actually"-ers of humanities and social sciences.

My book fits in with another recent book worth checking out, Daniel Clark's *Disruption in Detroit*, which argues that these jobs weren't that well-paying. Many workers were laid off constantly. They were always doing other jobs. Work was precarious, in ways that workers today would recognize. The ideal is that you go and clock in at General Motors at age twenty, you work thirty years, you get that pension, you get the boat on the lake. It was a grind, but you put two kids through college, and it was worth it.

But it wasn't worth it for a lot of people. These were violent workplaces. These were really terrible jobs, both in terms of monotony, being turned into a machine, being alienated from your job, but also for how dangerous they were. Your chance of being maimed or hurt, or having a heart attack on the job, or having a forklift flip over on you, or getting repetitive stress injuries — these were the different forms of violence workers had to deal with.

Researching the book, there were times when I was thinking about these workplaces and saying to myself, "How are people just letting this go on? How did people not decide to close these factories down to get a handle on these factories?" Because the levels of violence were so endemic.



Inside the Dodge Main plant.

MU

You emphasize that violence is inherent to the work process, independent from interpersonal violence happening on the factory floor. Can you describe that violence of the auto work itself?

JM

Much of the existing work on this subject focuses on interpersonal violence, painting violence as something that originates from workers' psyches — they're reacting to the unpleasant, dangerous work, or specific grievances with other workers, so from a psychological or industrial management point of view, employers ask, "How do you identify these kinds of violent people? How do you screen them out? How do you mollify them? How do you make sure that they don't blow up?"

I used a materialist approach. I looked at what is happening with the labor process. My work traces the rise and fall of violence at Chrysler in Detroit over a twenty-five-year period. It's not that Chrysler hired a bunch of bad people beginning in the mid-1960s. That's not an explanation of why violence skyrockets at that plant. It's because the labor process changed.

It wasn't worth it for a lot of people. These were violent workplaces. These were really terrible jobs.

The labor process in auto has always had violence baked into it. There's an enormous amount of injurious work, repetitive strain, risks of inhaling toxic fumes, risks of being maimed by a stamping press or a machine you're using on the line. There's a weight workers are carrying, the weight of that potential for violence against them.

But the key driver of stress is the line itself: How fast is it moving? How fast are the workers thus expected to move to keep up with it? That's the central dynamic of auto work. And that hasn't changed. It's a violent dynamic, and one that has conflict at its heart. The employer is always seeking to drive that line as fast as possible, and the workers are trying to survive it, with some semblance of dignity and enjoyment.

MU

What are examples of that process at work? What are the companies doing over the time period that you cover to increase that level of stress and strain and violence on their workforce? And how does that change over time?

JM

"Change over time" is the right phrase. It might seem basic, but I thought that was my major contribution to understanding violence at work through this book. I wanted to look at violence at work over time.

Over the past twenty years, there's been an enormous amount of legislation and employer policies about workplace violence. Most workers have a workplace violence policy at their job, or workplace violence training of some kind. But all of these developments proceeded from this idea that workplace violence was a new problem, that it started in the '80s when people started "going postal," bringing semiautomatic weapons into stores and factories and post offices and shooting workers and managers.

But we don't really know anything about violence at work over the last fifty years. What if we examined how violence at work changed over time, and examined what actors were causing the change? So I looked at twenty-five years of union grievances, because I have a historian's disposition — which doesn't mean a particular intelligence or imagination, but it does mean I have the ability to sit on my ass for a very long time, going through twenty-five years of grievances from the largest Chrysler plant in Detroit.

MU

In this time period, you write about Chrysler working its workers much harder and trying to wring out more production from fewer workers — the rate of production overall is going up, and the number of employees who are there to make that production happen is going down. Which adds to this constant strain and stress on these workers, right?

JM

Absolutely. We've talked about the image of the auto worker as a working-class aristocrat. The other part of the era's mythology was that there was a compact between labor and capital. To an extent, there was. But class war between labor and capital did not end.

Throughout the '50s and '60s, Chrysler does everything it can to take power off of the shop floor, eating away at the structures and practices that workers built to control disputes and control the pace of the line. Facing tighter foreign competition, Chrysler lacked the operating capital, the deep pockets that GM or Ford had. So Chrysler's profit maximization strategy was premised on making the line go faster with fewer people.

Even the limited bargain between capital and labor allowed for a lot of precarity and violence at work, along with an employer determined to get the most out of their capital investments. That means that workers are driven really hard.

Chrysler brought in black workers, who were given the lowest amount of seniority; they hired more supervisors to drive these workers harder; and they accomplished an automation speedup through the relentless abuse and exploitation of a predominantly young, African-American workforce. This happened in the late '60s and early '70s, and in my research, I found that at the exact same time, all types of interpersonal violence at that plant went up.

MU

This is supposed to be the golden era of US capitalism. But your book argues that it's not like there were thirty golden years suddenly ended by neoliberalism, bringing about attacks on unions and deindustrialization. You argue that as soon as the "golden era" begins, capital is chipping away at the good pay, the stable jobs, the jobs that will not maim you. That's present from early on in the period.

JM

Let's not forget that this era's compact between labor and capital rested on the expulsion of the most leftist elements of labor organizing. And there were all kinds of other black, female migrant workers, service workers, and retail workers that were shut out of the compact. But even this limited bargain allowed for a lot of precarity and violence at work, along with an employer determined to get the most out of their capital investments. That means workers are driven really hard.

MU

Your examination of grievance records from these auto plants gives an incredible look at life on the factory floor. It's a detailed, granular view of what life was actually like on the floor for these workers. And it seemed like a war zone.

JM

Historians have described the larger collapse of the liberal consensus in America as a result of different groups successfully pressing to join the New Deal order. But any New Deal-era stability won for working people was being eaten alive from inside this Chrysler plant.



1962 Lancer final assembly

Assembly of Dodge Lancer at the Dodge Main plant.

Chrysler's changes to the assembly line gave them more control in the workplace and allowed them to pump out tons of cars. But because it caused so much violence, so much tension, the operating metaphor used by many who worked in or observed those plants was a prison, complete with guards, cops showing up, murders, knifings, drug deals. It would make an incredible long-form dramatic series, given all the dynamics that were present. They sowed the seeds of their own destruction in the late '60s and early '70s.

MU

The book begins in 1960, after the immediate postwar period when the North American auto industry saw an epic struggle for control over the shop floor. Spoiler alert: capital wins. The classical historical telling of this defeat is that the focus of workers' bargaining moves from demanding and defending factory floor control to high wages and good benefits, the basic rudiments of a social-welfare state that American workers have never had provided by the government (despite labor's best efforts).

You say that the violence workers experience from the production process itself, and from the interpersonal violence that the production process produces, could have looked a lot different if workers had not lost their modicum of control over the production process. Because that control is lost, violence skyrockets.

JM

Absolutely. [Walter] Reuther himself, the great UAW leader, called the auto factories "gold-plated sweatshops"; he later said, "We never actually fixed any of the working conditions." This issue was kicked down the road indefinitely.

I attended a conference with people who were active in labor movements, including the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), where someone asked an important question: What would the trajectory of American labor look like if, during the spread of

workplace violence in the '60s and '70s, it's widely known throughout every sector of labor that these plants are out of control, and that people are getting hurt and killed and hurting and killing each other? What if the leaders of the labor movement had listened to people in DRUM and the [League of Revolutionary Black Workers](#), who said, "Actually, we need to address the root causes of these problems, and radical groups like DRUM have a constituency in the plants and ideas about solutions"? They don't do that.

MU

What was DRUM?

JM

DRUM stands for the [Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement](#), which was a radical, black-power union organization that started in the Dodge Main plant and spread to lots of other plants. It was one of the most significant workplace formations of the twentieth century in the United States, particularly in terms of its focus on capitalism and racism together at the point of production. It was extraordinarily influential and caught the attention of not only a lot of Detroiters, but auto workers as well. One of the things my research shows is that the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the auto companies were extremely scared by DRUM's organizing.

I also argue in the book that violence was a very double-edged sword for DRUM. I do think that they cleverly used rhetorical violence to get the UAW's attention, and to get Chrysler's attention, and succeeded. They had a lot of power behind their demands because of that. DRUM won a lot of their demands, in terms of hiring more black foremen, for example, or implementing other health and safety measures. But their relentless focus on violence, and the relentless rhetoric of violence in their public statements, drove a lot of people away.

MU

Let's take a more detailed look at this violence. Your book includes a chart where you list the total number of violent incidents recorded in grievances at the Dodge Main plant. There's a real shift in 1965. At its peak, we're talking about more than one violent incident a job per week at Dodge Main. Why? And what did these violent incidents look like on the shop floor?

JM

Violence doesn't start in 1965, but the increase in violence that you mention tracks pretty well with the intensification of the labor process at Chrysler, which relied upon the exploitation of young black workers. In the book, I define this increase as "outsider violence." These incidents are carried out by people who are coming into the plant as outsiders with no seniority. Almost all of their work supervisors and union officials are white. The workers are being driven incredibly hard, creating a more dangerous labor process. Accidents and deaths are increasing. And so are violent incidents.

The conditions created by Chrysler increased the risk of workplace disputes turning violent, including stabbings and shootings.

The other number I mention is the number of violent incidents involving management. Rituals of bullying the new guy are superseded by attacks at plant security, attacks on supervisors and foremen who reprimand lateness and production pace. The conditions

created by Chrysler increased the risk of workplace disputes turning violent, including stabbings and shootings.

The most well-known and well-remembered case is the James Johnson incident of 1970, when a Chrysler worker at the Eldon Axle plant experiences repeated workplace and racial harassment on the job, is suspended, and fears that means he's fired. He returns to the plant and shoots three people.

Incidents like this are depressingly mundane and familiar in America today, but they were incredibly novel at the time, so much so that *Newsweek* published a major story about the trial. And a real reckoning in Detroit took place over what the tragedy could be attributed to. Was it the disturbed mind of the killer? Or was it something in the way that the auto industry and auto unions were conducting themselves?

MU

Was there any real reckoning with such violence in the wake of that case?

JM

Yes. I argue in the book that it was more possible in 1970 Detroit to advance an explanation of workplace violence in terms of racial injustice and labor exploitation than it is now. Part of that is because of the radical organizing that was happening at these plants. Part of it was because of the radical attorneys who took on the case, putting Chrysler on trial during James Johnson's murder trial and giving national media attention to these crimes. As a result, James Johnson was found not criminally responsible, and another attorney later won a worker's compensation claim against Chrysler.



union election slate for the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement in 1970.

MU

You also discuss how the things that were going on *outside* the factory floor impacted what was happening *on* the factory floor. You have a very striking description of black workers who participated in the [1967 Detroit uprising](#), showing up to work with Afros and

fifty-caliber shell casings on necklaces. You can't ask for a much more blunt image of bringing the militancy in the streets onto the shop floor.

JM

One of the great experiences I had in researching this book was the opportunity to sit down and talk with [General Baker](#), the legendary Detroit organizer and activist. According to him, those fifty-caliber shells were picked up right off of the street, because the National Guard was firing at people during the '67 uprising. Baker said he'd been involved in radical left organizing for some time, but one thing that really struck him was the level to which the state tried to ensure that black people still got back to work during the uprising — that the line kept running. He said that the only value black people have in this society is as industrial workers. That was a really fundamental lesson for him and some of the others who started DRUM.

Many people have written eloquently about DRUM and its legacy, including people who were in DRUM themselves. But it is important to remember that the story continues, and that there is much more to learn and remember about this movement. A lot of people continue to support a wider narrative about black power and violence when talking about DRUM, which is the stereotype that black people are inherently violent.

MU

That's what the white union leaders were saying.

JM

Absolutely. Violence was happening in the plants as well as the streets, and DRUM was organizing around it, rather than bringing that violence into the plant to begin with. DRUM's organizers were saying, "This violence is happening because black workers are getting shit on. We need to do something about this."

MU

The workplace environment was saturated with violence, whether it came from daily work, interactions with other people, or interactions with foremen. DRUM's violent rhetoric didn't come out of nowhere.

JM

No, and one of the things that I try to highlight in this book that people have always asked me is, "What do you define as violence?" I argue that the definition of violence was up for grabs in these factories, something that workers and unionists and the plant and UAW argued over. One radical workers' newsletter asked at the time, "Why is it that when a worker gets frustrated and punches his boss, that's violence and it'll be on the news, but if you work someone too hard and they have a heart attack and die, that's not violence?"

DRUM's organizers were saying, 'This violence is happening because black workers are getting shit on. We need to do something about this.'

In this way, violence suffused the culture of work, and DRUM drew on that in their organizing. After news broke of James Johnson's shootings, there was an auto worker who went into work with the newspaper. He sees the foreman hassling one of his coworkers for being a few minutes late, and he goes over and he sticks that newspaper right in his face — a newspaper that talks about a worker at a different auto plant in the same city murdering



people. That is a part of the workplace culture, and people are using that culture of violence in a variety of different ways.

MU

You describe the disturbing events that are happening on the factory floor: people getting shot, punched, or beaten up. According to your book, things got so bad that in 1968, the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) held a counterinsurgency seminar in Detroit and distributed six hundred thousand copies of a pamphlet titled "Industrial Planning Guide Against Civil Disorders." Did NAM take notes from what was happening in Vietnam to pacify their own factories in Detroit?

JM

Absolutely. And to add another layer, the Detroit factory workers were making a lot of the war machines that went to Vietnam to kill people there. Black radicals made that point. They said, "We're making these weapons and they're going over to Vietnam, and the next time we have an uprising, they're going to be brought back home and pointed at us."

The NAM seminar shows a very real fear of insurgency in the plants and of those plants being seized by workers. This fear is yet another element of this era that resulted in consequences for workers today, because in response to this fear, and in connection with the military-industrial complex, Chrysler begins to invest in cameras, gates, and weaponry to protect its plants. And over the last fifty years, a fear of workplace violence has been used to justify all kinds of things, like personnel screenings, keystroke software, video cameras, the perp walk.

In this era, we see the emergence of a carceral workplace. These technologies of control and of surveillance are being used effectively in the workplace, both to deal with people in your ranks and to screen out any other possible threats to capital and property over the next fifty years.

MU

You include a quote from the DRUM newspaper talking about this counterinsurgency seminar: "They further projected arming the plant protection guards with revolvers, and in the key areas, guard towers with semiautomatic rifles."

JM

We've talked about how union leadership doesn't work with DRUM and is not willing to say, "We might not agree with calling the UAW sellout pigs, but let's sit down and hear what these workers have to say about what's happening on the line." But this seminar shows that bosses actually take it a step further. High-ranking unionists in Detroit are going to secret meetings with auto executives, cops, and Michigan state troopers to say, "What are we going to do about the plants?" This fear of security, which they use as a fear of black militancy, allows for a rapprochement between capital and big labor. Union leaders see themselves as partners in maintaining order in the plant, as opposed to acting as workers' representatives.

MU

You've obviously been talking about how violent the production process itself was. That's the ground upon which all of this stands. Fast forward several decades to the state of labor

today in North America. Obviously, most, if not all, of these plants that you describe in the book are gone or significantly diminished in Detroit and in Ontario. How much of the violence that you chronicle is the product of the *industrial* labor process? And does that violence change in a deindustrializing twenty-first century?

JM

Work is still exploitative at the point of production. So it is still violent. One of the biggest works that inspired me to become a historian of work and capitalism is Studs Terkel's [Working](#). The book starts with this quote: "This is a book about work, which means it is a book about violence." Violence changes over time.



Workers pack and ship customer orders at the Amazon fulfillment center on August 1, 2017 in Romeoville, Illinois. (Scott Olson / Getty Images)

The predominant violence of early industrialization in America was mass violence. It's [Homestead](#); it's [Ludlow](#). It's huge strikes with mass movements of workers squaring off against tons of representatives of capital and the state on horseback. Now, it has become very atomized.

Take a look at auto production today. Tesla factories and auto plants in the South are saturated in carnage. The iconic company of contemporary capitalism is Amazon. Their warehouses are slaughterhouses. Some research shows that one in five workers at a Los Angeles processing center suffers not just an injury, but a *debilitating* injury. That shows that this type of violence is still central to capitalism.

MU

I think that's right, but in the contemporary workplace, there doesn't seem to be the same level of violence between workers, or between a worker and a supervisor (aside from the high-profile incidents like workplace shootings, which is one form that such violence does

still take). Is the kind of violence you describe in the book a product of the historical context of high union density and full employment?

With high union density, if you're accused of punching a foreman for acting out of line, you at least have some modicum of due process. And with full employment, if you do get fired, you can walk down the street and go to another auto plant. The situation for American workers today is much different on both counts. How much of the interpersonal violence on the shop floor is a product of that political-economic context of 1960 to 1980?

JM

A fair amount. I argue in the book that every mode of work under capitalism gets the kind of violence it deserves. In this era, the combination of dangerous, exploitative work and the presence of a robust UAW created a dysfunctional dynamic in which workers were miserable and felt able to express these emotions. Through the more bureaucratic unionism of the '60s and '70s, conflicts were not fully resolved with a meeting between a powerful shop steward and a boss who says, "You guys need to work this out, because we can't have you fighting anymore." Rather, the angry workers seethe. This leads to a situation where people are lashing out, but they don't get fired for it. With the same people coming back into work after being involved in a conflict, these conflicts get worse and worse.

A dominant part of workplace culture in the next decade, however, is the phenomenon of mass layoffs. This era was marked by the fear that the laid-off worker was going to come back with a gun.

Michael Douglas's movie [Falling Down](#) dramatizes this. I trace how you get from Ludlow and Homestead to the kind of violence that is predicted in film [Blue Collar](#) with Richard Pryor, to the *Falling Down* era.



Michael Douglas in *Falling Down* (1993).

In the last twenty or thirty years, workplace violence has taken different forms. But certainly, workplace violence is no less endemic than ever. And in the past five years, this violence has increasingly taken the form of sexual exploitation and sexual violence in the workplace. We don't have the history to say whether or not this type of violence is more prevalent than

ever before, but it's become more discussed as a particular type of workplace violence that exists in an era with intense power disparity between people who have power to control workers' access to a livelihood.

MU

In your book, you discuss mob violence that characterized labor conflicts in the early years. Over time, we move toward more individualized forms of workplace violence, where the stress of the workplace finds an atomized expression through the "unhinged psycho" shooting up his workplace after being laid off. That violence is still with us. What is the state of workplace violence in North America today?

JM

Yes, workplace violence is still very much with us. I would argue that it is one of the most important spaces that fosters the mass violence that has spread beyond the workplace, to schools, daycares, and nightclubs . . .

MU

Basically every social space in American life.

JM

Absolutely. The violence of the workplace is everywhere. I believe that this mass violence has become ritualized in culture as a form of communication, and that this kind of communication began at work.

The violence of the workplace is everywhere.

But the last thing I want to mention is the impact of the coronavirus. To some extent in Canada, and to a greater extent in the United States, we have seen capital and the state do whatever it takes to push people back into work, to push people into the economy restarting again, literally at the risk of death. It's more important to restart the economy, to boost stock prices, than it is for workers to survive.

I've spent six or seven years of my life arguing that work is fundamentally violent. It is about producing profits over human life, health, and flourishing. I never thought it would be so bluntly demonstrated as I've seen it demonstrated in the last seven months.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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