

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

General Motors Lordstown Plant

Strike of 1972

O. H. 553

HAROLD LILLER

Interviewed

by

Robin Schuler

on

February 14, 1981

## HAROLD LILLER

Harold Liller was born June 16, 1948 in Braddock, Pennsylvania. Liller graduated from high school in 1966 and directly after had short-term jobs as a tree surgeon and fireman for the PA-Lake Erie Railroad. He has worked from October of 1966 to the present at the Lordstown General Motors Plant, except for a stint in the Marines from 1968 to 1970.

Liller having a comparatively long career out at GM has had different jobs including one in management. Liller considers himself a "free thinker" out at Lordstown. He seems to be a buffer between management and union, probably one who is closer to the reality of the situation.

Liller is married and has three children. He recently graduated from Youngstown State University the winter of 1981 with a degree in history. He is considering graduate work, perhaps in law.

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INTERVIEWEE: HAROLD LILLER

INTERVIEWER: Robin Schuler

SUBJECT: Labor unrest, GMAD, Wildcat strike, Union-management hostility

DATE: February 14, 1981

S: This is an interview with Mr. Harold Liller for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, by Rob Schuler, at 102 Country Green Drive, Austintown, Ohio, on February 14, 1981, at 2:30 p.m. We are going to talk about the labor unrest at the General Motors Lordstown plant and more specifically the radical problems in 1971-1972.

Okay, Harold, could you tell me a little bit about your own personal background?

L: I'm a Pennsylvanian. I was born June 16, 1948 in Braddock, Pennsylvania. I went to school in the Norwin school system in Northunt Township, Pennsylvania. I graduated in 1966 where I joined the work force world. I worked six months as a tree surgeon--well about four months as a tree surgeon and two months as a fireman on the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad. That is how I came out here. From October 1966 until the present I have been working at General Motors in Lordstown. I am now thirty-two years old, married, and have three children.

S: How did you come about working out at GM (General Motors)?

L: I answered an advertisement, a help-wanted advertisement. At the time in October 1966 they were putting on a second shift. They were hiring people to put on the second shift at Lordstown. It has started production somewhere around May of 1966. I found myself in the area because again I was working for the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad working out of the Campbell yard. I found out that I had been hired on there as summer help for vacation replacement. I was

working the extra when work was stood up. You would work some. You didn't work a whole lot. So I answered the ad at Lordstown, and I got hired at Lordstown.

S: If you could remember back and pick your worst job at the plant, could you tell me what a typical workday was like back then?

L: When I first got hired in 1966, 1967, it was in the paint shop. I was working the masking line where you mask off the interior of the car before the exterior was painted. So in the process you had to mask off the interior, so that you wouldn't get overspray on them. You worked outside in what they called the wet-sand oven. You worked right outside the mouth of the oven, so that when the cars came through, the bodies came through, they were at a temperature above boiling. I would say 230 degrees or 240 degrees Fahrenheit. You applied glue and you would mask off various portions of the car on my job, and you put on various moldings that had to be started out as a two-man operation when I was on the job. The same operation turned into a four-man operation later on when I left the job, when I was in the service. For the two years that I was in the service, it was a four-man operation. That was probably the worst job I had at General Motors. Again it was during that 1966, 1967, 1968 time span where there weren't really a whole lot of good jobs at General Motors.

S: What has the rest of your career been like? Have you had many different jobs?

L: I have moved around quite a bit. Again when I was at the paint shop, I went into the spray booths. I was a paint sprayer for a while. I was a painter. Then in 1970 after my return from the service I decided to go down to hard trim and go downstairs more or less. The paint shop was on the second floor. I moved around quite a bit down there. I put in emergency brakes, heaters, air-conditioning, fuel lines. Then I went into supervision for two years. I spent two years in supervision. Dissatisfied with that I went back on the line. Consequently now I am an ARO, Absentee Replacement Operator, where I switch jobs almost every day.

S: Could you give me a real rough sketch of what you think had been happening at GM from when you started there up until 1971?

L: In 1966, 1967, and 1968 the years prior to my joining the service, the general atmosphere was one of hostility from management to the work force which again was met with hostility from the work force to the management. A lot of the problems, I believe, that occurred at General Motors was that the company hired mainly eighteen and nineteen year-old kids in 1966 and 1967, looking perhaps down the

road a little bit saying they could save a little bit of money on fringe benefits because they were hiring single. It might have caused them a lot of trouble because again in that time frame, they are not the most stable individuals either. There was a high turnover rate of individuals and a high hostility rate and consequently a high confrontation.

S: Do you think they were trying to save on pensions in the future and vacations and stuff?

L: I would say yes. I would say they were trying to save on the fringe benefits. The hours and the wages remained the same, so I would have to say it was fringe benefits. The people they chose as managers to open the plant were hard core people from the 1940's and the 1950's who weren't ready to deal with an obstinate youth more or less who were used to being the lord and master. So you had two conflicting ideologies. You had a work force who perhaps wanted a little bit more autonomy, and you had a managerial force that was used to dealing authoritarially with this work force. It was ready-made for a confrontation. You would have wildcat strikes almost on a daily basis. One week in particular we went in for five days and got at total of eleven hours of actual paid time. In the same time span I can remember the international union coming down telling us to cool it and to play the company's game for a while. We figured that the international union was selling out to the company. We even threw the international union representative out of the union hall, literally bodily threw him out. We literally picked him up and threw him out when they were in the union hall in Newton Falls. There were a lot of hassles.

Then I went into the service. I spent two years in the Marine Corps and came back out again. There was a major transformation. When I went in, we were building full-size Chevys and Pontiac Firebirds. When I came out, they were just starting to put action on the Vega. Attitudes in that two-year span had changed dramatically. I could see it. It was almost like night and day. It seemed like the word had gotten down from Detroit that no matter what it took they wanted to get this Vega out. If it took two people on every job, we had to get this Vega out on time because this company at that time had made commitments to the public that this was in fact . . . They were going to bring this car out at a specific time and at a specific price. It seemed like everyone could get good jobs. There were very few really bad jobs. They started a process of what we call doubling up where you had two people . . . If you had a four-man job, you had two people working for half an hour and you had two people playing cards or reading or doing whatever for a half an hour, and then you just switched off. So in a normal eight-hour day you would work literally less than four hours because you would also get your relief rate of

twenty-three minutes in the morning and twenty-three minutes in the afternoon. So you would end up working three hours and forty-seven minutes for the whole day.

S: You don't think the tension of working on the line would justify working on and off like that, or was it just blatant goofing off?

L: It wasn't necessarily blatant goofing off because I found that from what I have read from other plants in the General Motors system and probably throughout the country that it wasn't anything that didn't happen in any other plant. Specifically I was reading an article about a Corvette plant in St. Louis a little while ago where it was even worse from what was going on in Lordstown from what I read. It just seemed strange to me because I had been away during those two years during that transition. I'm not even sure if there was a transition. When I came back, it was an altogether different plant than the one I left. Even managerial attitudes had changed because they said that they couldn't afford a labor unrest that we had prior to 1966.

S: How about the consolidation into GMAD (General Motors Assembly Division)?

L: General Motors Assembly Division was a product of some mastermind in Detroit, one of these we-can-do-better deals. It is similar to the difference between Fisher Body and Chevrolet. All it is is just a different name of the same organization. It is still General Motors. General Motors Assembly Division is just a group of efficiency experts who said, "Hey, if you give us a shot at assembling cars, we can save you some bucks." They came in, I would say, October of 1972. I'm not sure of the date.

S: I think I have in the Fall of 1971.

L: I know it was in the Fall when they came in. There was really no mass turnover of managerial personnel. Your foremen were still your foremen. Your general foreman was still your general foreman. The only difference was perhaps at the attitude of the top. The attitude at the top was that they were going to cut quote unquote "the fat out of the line." The thing about it was that once a job was set-up the company and union sign an agreement saying that all things being equal. In other words if the line speed doesn't change up or down or if the work components don't change one way or the other, that the job is set for the model as long as you are running that specific car. So if you set a job up building full-size Chevys, and as long as you are building full-size Chevys and that job remains the same, company or union are not allowed to fool with the job. In other words the company or union can't

go back on the agreement saying that there is too much work in that job. Prior to that they had settled to that. The company can't come in saying that they have too much manpower on that job because they had in fact settled in writing that this is what is happening and what General Motors Assembly Division came in saying. They basically said that all the past agreements are by the board, we had overstaffed the plant originally when we went to build it later. In a way the union acquiesced to it saying that the guys were doubling up in fact. By the fact that you are doubling up you are showing them that you have too many people on the jobs.

In the same token most people felt like I felt. It was the union's responsibility to make the company live up to past agreements. If the union would sign the agreements giving a specific wage for the span of a contract . . . and in fact they did in 1967; I believe it was where they put a cap on the cost of living allowance from 1967 until 1970 where we lost in the vicinity of 50¢ to 60¢ an hour. The union couldn't go back to renegotiate that contract because they had put their signature to it. They were in fact allowing the company to come in because of a mistake that the company felt they made two years ago or a year ago to come in and throw out all those past agreements. The company did it. The company went through, and they started cutting manpower. If you had a four-man operation and they figured you could do it with three men or two men . . . Say if you had a four-man operation and they figured you could do it with two men, they would cut three men and have one man do it and then add the second man. Then they would settle up again. It was basically the way they went through it. It made a lot of hostility because they just went through carte blanche and just started cutting manpower. You never knew who was going to be next. There was a lot of hostility. You couldn't even trust the union because they were the ones coming through saying not to double up and because we had doubled up that we had brought this all on ourselves.

S: That was when they started the increase on the line from 60 cars an hour to 100 cars an hour or something like that.

L: They had increase in lines. At the time they were increasing line speeds at the same time they were decreasing manpower, but I'm not sure. I'm pretty sure we were building 100 cars an hour at the same time.

S: I think it was known as the fastest line in the world.

L: Yes, it was the fastest line in the world. Prior to GMAD I believe we were still building 100 cars an hour. What they did basically was cut manpower.

- S: Yes, that was where the gripe came in with them that they cut many people and laid off people.
- L: They took the manpower.
- S: You said that management was the same at the foreman levels and at the lower levels.
- L: Right.
- S: How about the upper levels? Would you say that company policies were sometimes childish or authority being exercised for its own sake?
- L: Basically what it got down to was that if you could break an agreement, if you could literally break a contract--a local agreement is a local contract between a local management and a local union--if you can break that agreement, then you are exercising arbitrary power. That was what it got down to. They would have campaigns like against beds. Sometimes what people would do was take a piece of cardboard and lay it on an empty rack--storage rack. It would be break time, and you would take a little twenty-three minute nap or at lunch time you would take a twenty-three minute nap. Well, they would go through, and they would wake you up. They would say that you couldn't sleep and that this wasn't a hotel. They would say, "This isn't a Holiday Inn." That was the expression that was used. They would tell you that you were supposed to work there.
- They would go on other campaigns. There was no reading on the line. You weren't allowed to read on the line. You were allowed to have newspapers and books, but you weren't allowed to read them. They would be time studying a job. They would have all the components down, and they would have a stopwatch and know how long it would take you to do each individual component. While they were time studying your job, you weren't allowed to talk to another employee because that would take time away. It was almost jokingly petty. At the same time they were also issuing various amounts of discipline at the same time. They were arbitrarily throwing out individuals sometimes up to discharge, anywhere from the balance of the ship up to discharge. It was arbitrary. It was to try to enforce the idea in people's mind that they do in fact have the power and the standard. Again it was the same general foremen. It was the same personnel who prior to GMAD everything was jovial, and prior to that stage everything was authoritarian. It was the same individuals.
- S: It wasn't foremen working on their own though. It was something that was being handed down.
- L: It was an attitude from above.



S: They were being trained from above.

L: They were being manipulated from above. Even so in my mind it was an interesting arrangement. They might have had a point saying that we were in fact overmanned, but again every other plant in the system was probably overmanned in some degree in one degree or another. I'm not sure that Lordstown was any more so than any other plant. The interesting point I thought was that they made little, ridiculous things to prove a point that we can in fact do it.

S: They just wanted to break the authority of the union and increase their own.

L: In ways the union went along because they had a vested interest in it too. It wasn't the union standing up. A lot of times it was the people who forced the union to taking a stand in my mind. Where do you stand on this issue, committeeman? Where do you stand on this issue, zone man? Where do you stand on this issue, president? I was under the impression that the union would much rather have the whole thing go away. They were the ones saying that if we doubled up, we were just bringing it upon ourselves. They weren't the ones saying that we had to make the company live by the past agreements. It was not to lose at least a sense of sympathy with the company's point of view.

S: What did the union think about the wildcat strikes? Do you think they looked at it as a kind of steam valve when things would build up, guys would walk out of the plant and just let them go out and let the steam blow until they are ready to go back to work?

L: They had to show some leadership. They couldn't let anarchy reign. A lot of it was political where you would have one individual in your union trying to elevate it who knew that the next time elections came around that he was going to run for a higher office. To do that he would have to show his leadership, but in the same token if you lead a wildcat strike, you also are up for automatic discharge. There is a provision on the contract where if you try to lead a wildcat strike or an illegal strike--because they tried to fire me one time over an illegal strike, not over a wildcat strike that supposedly slowed work down--that you are in fact up for discharge. So it had to be done in such a way that everyone knew you were the cause of it, this wildcat strike, but the company could not come down and pin you down as the leader of the wildcat strike.

These individuals would walk through specific areas. Everyone doesn't have to go out on strike to shut the plant down. If you have forty people from a specific area, windshield

area because it takes specific skills to put in a windshield, if you had thirty or forty people to leave the area, you have to shut the whole plant down because you can't build cars without windshields. Consequently you can't build cars without windshields. Consequently you can't build cars without engines or whatever. So you would have these individuals for their own political reasons would go through and say at 9:00 to walk out and that they were going to have a walkout in this area at 11:00 and that they would expect everybody from this area to be out there and that they were going to show them. At 10:30 someone would walk through with the labor relation representative from the company and vocally and overtly say that they couldn't have us walkout because it would be an illegal strike and at the same time he would be winking as he was going by. That was the kind of thing that would happen.

I can remember one time specifically where they had disciplined someone on the other side of the plant. They had moved the bumper line. They put bumpers on in hard trim. They had moved the bumpers onto the other side, and they disciplined somebody down there. They cut manpower in the process. They were supposedly not doing the job right. It was a well-known individual from hard trim. The committeeman came through and said that they were going to walk out at 11:00 and that they were going to show them. Then he came through at 9:30 saying that they weren't going to walk out. We did in fact walk out. We had the A-2 door on the west side of the plant. When we were going to the door, there seemed to be fifty, sixty, or seventy people. When we got outside, and I started counting heads, there were a total of eighteen. Playing both side against the middle sort of confuses people too. We were sort of hung out to dry, us eighteen. It was funny.

S: That wasn't the fabrication plant?

L: No, no, no. I can't come up with the date. They ended up shutting the plant down for the day because we walked out and the bumper line walked out. The bumper line walked out first, but they had gotten manpower to run the bumper line. So they said that we were going to walk out too, so we walked out. Somehow they got the manpower. Well, it wouldn't have been hard to fill eighteen jobs. Then at 2:30 they shut the plant down early anyway because they had gotten the strain. The company was trying to show the union in fact that they could run the plant even with these minor walkouts when in fact they really couldn't. But it was interesting. The people who got discipline weren't necessarily the people who deserved discipline other than perhaps being a little bit overtrusting and a little bit idealistic for their own good.

S: Would you correlate the labor unrest down at the plant with

the young work force? Would you say they are in fact more militant, those people who you said were hired in the late 1960's?

L: For all intents and purposes this is in fact my first job. I have worked like I said for the tree company and the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad, but this was in fact my first job. When I first started there in 1966, 1967, and 1968, it was the first time I really worked indoors in a factory situation. I knew I was tired when I went home, but everyone was tired when they went home. Everyone was equally tired; they were exhausted. I always thought that this was the way it was supposed to be because I really had nothing to gage of what it was someplace else. I thought this was the way it was supposed to be. It was different because when I came back in 1970 I saw all the changes that had occurred and the manpower that was added. I thought that maybe this was what it could have been like the four years prior to that.

S: How about the pressure that went along with that working hard? Was there a lot of pressure and tension then?

L: When you are working on an assembly line, it is a unique way to make a living because the line itself snakes throughout the shop. The cars are different color and all, but it is still the same car. You are still doing the same thing on the same car, throughout the week, throughout the month, throughout the model year. If you don't change cars, perhaps for years, five, six, or seven years, you could be doing the same thing on the same job. For a certain mind set, I guess, it could be alright. I can remember one time standing on the assembly line looking at this red car. I just put a heater in this red car. I looked across four lines over at the cars that hadn't reached me yet. There was another red car. The thought struck me that somewhere down the line there was another red car and another red car. It was like an infinite, neverending process that I was always going to be putting heaters in red cars for the rest of my life. It was sort of a shocking situation.

The vast majority of most people don't like working on an assembly line; some people do. You are sort of trapped by the pay and the fringe benefits and the idea that we really are unskilled labor. We are in fact unskilled labor. We are getting paid \$10 an hour as unskilled labor plus fringe benefits which would probably bring it up to about \$15 or \$16 an hour. You get trapped into a life style which is where I am at right now trapped in this life style. You have to either come to grips with that either you have to put up with all this garbage which you don't like when you are at work to maintain the life style that you are living today when you leave work, or you go stark raving mad. You go into the dope scene and into the alcohol, and

you try to escape from the reality of the situation. There is a lot of that. There are a lot of drugs and alcohol at Lordstown. I don't think that most people see it the same way as I see it. They haven't come to that point yet where they are saying, "Well, I'm taking these drugs because I really don't like my work and everything, but my work buys me." They just do it. Again it is an offshoot of the job.

S: How about on mental illness out there?

L: It brings to mind a little anecdote with a friend of mine. He was telling me about this really great analyst that he had. He had recommended him to a friend of his. When his friend has gone to see the analyst and the analyst asked him where he worked, he told him that he worked at General Motors. Then he asked him how long he had worked there, and he said one year. The analyst said, "You just got to me now?"

S: I have heard a lot about people who I have known who worked out there who were being prescribed valium by their family doctor to get to sleep. A lot of people took a lot of time off from work for what they claimed as mental stress and so forth.

L: It seems sort of hard to see how you can have mental stress when you are doing the same job day after day after day. You in fact are not using any mental processes. They look for warm bodies at the plant. That is what management uses. Instead of saying, "I need three people to run my line," because they have three people absent, the foreman will say, "Hey, I need three warm bodies." That is basically what they mean. They necessarily don't want any intelligence involved. There is stress, literally stress. What do you do with your mind for eight or nine or ten hours a day? What do you do with your mind when you no longer need it? You can't shut it off. It is interesting what some people do. Personally, I read. It helps get me through the day here. Other people do other things.

S: With the women working out at the plant now, do you think other people might find things to do by not just concentrating? That would make it hard on women with guys having nothing to do all day except stare.

L: Perhaps you would have to talk to a woman about that. They started working there right prior to my coming out of the service in 1970. I wasn't prepared for that new change in the environment. With good working class values that I have come up with, you always talk polite to people. Some of the first women hired at the plant could outspoke a mule skinner. It took me completely aback. I guess they were just trying to fit in too with the shop talk and everything. It took me by surprise. They fit in. I'm not sure there

is much difference between a man working on the assembly line and a woman working on the assembly line. I'm not sure there is that much difference between a man working next to a woman on the assembly line.

S: Really?

L: I have heard some people say that working 10 or 11 or 12 hours next to a woman on the assembly line even the most ugliest women look good to them. Perhaps I am the exception to the rule. It never affected me in that way because I had a happy home life too. Like I said, perhaps you would have to talk to them.

S: That is a good idea. On September 1971, there was a wildcat strike at the fabrication plant. Do you remember anything about that?

L: Yes, they shut us down.

S: Right. Do you remember if there was anything like violence? I read one account where guys were wearing paper bags on their heads, and they called the sheriffs.

L: Yes, I know a couple of individuals.

S: You didn't work in the fabrication plant at the time.

L: I didn't work in the fabrication plant at the time. The sheriff department came in and arrested a couple of them. One of them had a gun I believe. It was just one of those ways that a group of individuals were trying to fight back.

S: I also heard . . .

L: Outside the union because you couldn't trust the union even because they didn't know where they stood or who they stood with.

S: Somebody told me that they were trying to find out the identity of these people with their faces covered, and the company had a zoom camera from the top of the buildings.

L: They drove by. I was just talking to one of the individuals the night before they shut down that in fact the company drove by in a car with a camera. They were taking pictures, and they had all of the pictures up in labor relations, and they had all of the foremen coming up trying to identify specific people. Some people they could identify, and some people they didn't. If I remember correctly, the sheriff's department did come up and arrest some people and took them out to Newton Falls and the judge threw the book at them. One guy was carrying a gun. There were a lot of guns at Lordstown, knives.

S: Is that interworker problems?

L: Yes, the thing isn't directed to management. A lot of people feel they have to be able to protect themselves at work. That is interesting.

S: Are there race relations at all in that or people from Southern Ohio and Kentucky?

L: It cuts across racial lines, and it cuts across geographical backgrounds. Maybe it is a commentary on society as a whole. I'm not sure. There were a lot of knives. They played with knives out there a lot. It is interesting. I'm surprised somebody really hasn't been . . . Although people have been threatened with guns. There was one incident maybe six months ago. A man carried a gun into work with him because somebody else had threatened his life with a gun in the plant, and he was going to get even. The company came in with a guard, and they escorted him out of the plant. I understand that he was discharged. That was race related though.

Okay, later in the year problems started again in December of 1971.

S: Was this when the sabotage happened?

L: Right, before the actual strike when the people were fighting back on their own. Again things kept building to a head because the company was making a stand; the people were resisting the stand, and the union was sort of caught somewhere in between. To be a member of the union you still had to maintain your fifty percent plus one backing of the people, or you would lose your election. They were finally forced into taking a stand. It started out by we will show them that they can't do this to us, and we don't necessarily want you guys to sabotage the car like scratch the paint or break parts or anything. They had a lot of repairs, so they filled the repair yard up. The money they were saving by cutting labor off of the assembly line, they were spending in the repair yard trying to fix the car before they could send them to the dealers.

Then again the company took the point that they were going to resist this to the utmost. Little by little people started taking it in to their own accord to take it into their own hands to further the repairs. A lot of people would take something sharp or a sharp object and scratch the paint, and they would cut fuel lines, and they could cut brake lines. It got literally out of hand. The company screamed sabotage, and it was sabotage. A lot of it was brought on by policies followed by the company when the union came back in retaliation, and the people took it upon themselves, the workers took it upon themselves to go maybe one step further than maybe the union was willing to go.

Again the union didn't necessarily come back and disallow the whole thing either. They didn't come back and say, "Hey, sabotage is literally a bad thing," other than the fact that if you cut the brake lines, somebody at the end of the line might be driving that car. A fellow worker might be driving that car. Something like scratching paint, or breaking glass or something, they didn't necessarily condone it; they didn't condemn it either. It again fit into their motives then too. We started getting national attention.

S: This was what precipitated the strike then because I guess they were sending people home when they would get the repair yards filled up.

L: The repair yard would fill up. It wouldn't take a whole lot to fill the repair yard up because again the repairmen who were working to fix the cars weren't doing it really rapidly either. They had gone on a slowdown. It was beyond the capacity to keep up anyway. If you came in on the first shift--I'm not sure of the capacity they would repair--but I think it was somewhere in the vicinity of 3500 cars. It was a lot of cars. You had to put a lot of parts into it. That was if you would use up all of the yards literally to the overflow. You might only have space for 300 or 200 cars in the repair yard because that was all the repairmen could handle from the time the second shift went home until right now, and they working under twelve and a half four shifts. We would put 300 cars in the repair yard which was practically every car coming out of the line. Three hundred cars is three hours of work, so we would work three hours and then go home. You wouldn't get paid for that because the company took the point of view that it was in fact shoddy workmanship.

Then they went public with the sabotage. As soon as the company went public with the sabotage they brought a bunch of outsiders down, union, management, press, left wing radicals, right wing radicals, anybody. Pretty soon we had a Lordstown syndrome. It went from a local issue to a national syndrome. It was workers revolting against authoritarian regime. It in fact got blown out of proportion. Again a lot of it was by union representatives too, union and company. They were using the press for their own purposes. Gary Brainer was union president at the time who had a few interviews. The company called him a communist, and he called them fascists. He was interviewed by Playboy magazine and by The New York Times. There was a lot. He ended up getting a post in the government. He originally got a post with the Ohio governor.

S: Gillan?

L: Gillan was some kind of labor representative. He ended up back at Lordstown again working on the assembly line. It was straight from Columbus, to Washington, and back to Lordstown

again. I guess everyone comes back to their roots. Everyone was playing the press and playing to the press. At the same time the company was literally discharging individuals right and left for sabotage, attempted sabotage, suspected sabotage, and God knows what else. I remember one individual. He was a repairman. There was a broken headlight coming down the line. His foreman told him to take the headlight out and put another headlight in, so he took the headlight out and put another headlight in. The metal in the fixture was bent ever so slightly. You couldn't really get the springs in to hold the headlight. The foreman told him to tap it in with his hammer to try to bend the metal even with the headlight in it. He broke that headlight trying to tap it in, and they threw that individual out for sabotage. He ended up getting a balance and thirty days. He never did get paid for it. That was just one incident of many. While the union and the company were fighting it out in the presses, upper management and upper union was fighting in the presses, the people working on the line and lower management were fighting it out.

S: Duking it out.

L: Yes, duking it out down there. It caused a lot of hard feelings and a lot of lost money for an individual. Little by little people polarized. We finally couldn't take it anymore. We had to do something, so we went out on a strike.

S: The strike itself was in March of 1972 after all of these other things evolved.

L: Yes.

S: I think the events leading up to the strike were more exciting.

L: Than the strike itself, yes. The strikes at Lordstown were every day. It was something to look forward to. Hopefully, you would time your strikes around good weather.

S: Right.

L: So you could go water skiing out at Lake Milton.

S: You don't remember any acts of violence or anything or gun fighting? I don't know if it was during the wildcat or during the strike itself that they wouldn't let the management leave the plant.

L: That was silly.

S: You were teasing them.

L: Yes, that was silly. There were a couple of incidents where



people crashed the picket line I believe. It was the management personnel crashing the picket line. Tony Cadamo was one specifically I can remember. He hit a guy with his car or vice versa. He claims vice versa.

S: That is right. I remember seeing that now.

L: He claims vice versa. He claimed that the guy hit his car, and the guy claimed that he hit him. Who is to say? It never really got down to axe handles and busting heads if that is what you mean. It never did. It never would have. Supposedly as radical as that work force was they weren't physical. I really believe that. They would duke it out among themselves, but they wouldn't physically harm a member of management. It was interesting.

S: Maybe they were still afraid of authority at that level. Do you think?

L: I'm not sure; I'm really not sure why they perhaps would cut a brake line. They wouldn't do something overtly. It is an interesting point of view. I would tell the foreman that I was going to screw his eyes out. Then he would catch me doing it. Then I would tell them why or when I thought I was wrong. I would say that he was just treating me shitty. Tomorrow everything would be alright. People knew where I stood.

S: It is always better that way.

L: Hopefully, hopefully. Again I was maybe one of the last of the idealists out there. I held my ideal maybe longer because I spent two years away. It was almost like starting all over again.

S: What do you think your position was at that time?

L: I could see putting cars in the repair lot. I could see doing that because by putting the cars in the repair lot . . . If they cut manpower in the assembly line . . . My position was this, that the company by virtue of them signing the prior agreements on manpower that they committed themselves to the span of building that car to this specific manpower. The only way they could change the manpower requirements-- now there are certain ways, paragraph seventy-nine in the local and national agreement--is by changing the methods. You could decrease manpower on a specific job by either changing methods or decreasing the workload on a specific job. By arbitrarily going through and doing that then they were violating that clause in the contract. I felt that was in fact wrong. That was my position. That was where I came to blows with the union because they were saying that because we had doubled up on those jobs work a half an hour and have a half an hour

off that that act on our part negated the national agreement. I was saying that was a nonsensible point of view. But again that was the only position that they could have taken other than going out on strike. That was why I ran against Andy Frost, committeeman.

S: Have you held any union position out there?

L: No, I never held a union position. I had long hair and a beard and a mustache, and I used to wear a bandana and shout death to the fascists. It was a nice game for me. It kept my mind occupied.

S: Something to look forward to at work.

L: Something to look forward to every morning. I would harass at the door. You would have to show them your badge to get inside the door. They would ask me where my badge was, and I would say, "Who in their right mind would come out here at 6:00 in the morning if they didn't work here? You fascists. You fascist pigs." A lot of people thought that I was a communist. I told them that I wasn't a communist and that I was a nationalist. I don't believe in communism or socialism. What we had to do was nationalize these industries not socialize them. They didn't know I was playing games with them. It was fun. Again I had gotten a reputation as a free thinker more or less. People would ask me to be like a spokesperson between them and various other power groups, company, union, or whatever trying to give their point of view. That precipitated my running for office. I lost. My brother and I were running at the same time. My brother won. My brother was a committeeman in another section of the plant, in another section of hard trim. Hard trim had two committeemen. He won, and he tried to tell the truth to everybody. He got respect from company, and he got respect from some people. I found out later that he got respect from the company because he said something and he meant it. If he said, "I'm going to screw you," he would screw you. People weren't ready for the truth, and two years later he lost in the election. He tried to run again, and they still weren't ready for the truth. He would tell people they were screwed up and were wrong, and people aren't ready for that. I guess a union official has to be a politician first and an idealist later.

S: Recently the decline of the American auto industry has more or less been blamed on unions, worker productivity. Just recently I read this piece in the paper that the union out at Lordstown is going to keep an eye on General Motors management this time to make sure that they do their part and the J-cars won't end up in the route of the Corvair or the Vega as pieces of rusty scrap in two years.

L: In 1970 when they started building the Vega they gave

everybody a little coin set, proof set to supposedly symbolize perfection and money. It was proof set. It comes from mint.

S: Right, untouched by human hands.

L: Untouched by human hands type of deal. It was symbolizing like our efforts to strive and to in fact bring perfection to this Vega. Everything bad said about the Vega is true; most of it is true, except that most of it was caused by poor engineering. I know that DeLorean is on the third agency at General Motors, and he claims that General Motors really didn't do a whole lot of engineering with the Vega and that they just sort of threw it together and that is what happened. What is going to happen to the J-car or whatever on down the pipe is sort of immaterial. It is management's responsibility to produce a quality product. It is interesting. They showed everybody in the plant this videotape of the new chairman of the board, and they took it out on company time. It was about seven or eight minutes about quality and about how we have to fight foreign competition. The television that they showed it on was a Sony, and the videotape machine that they showed it on was a Panasonic. It seemed sort of a bad example to show against foreign competition, that and the fact that they were trying to use Japanese dies to try to build parts. It was an interesting thing. It is easy to blame the American worker for poor quality, but in reality it is management's responsibility to bring in good quality. I was going to make this point before.

In 1970 and 1971 prior to GMAD coming in they used to have a machine out there . . . Every car would have its own repair ticket. The inspectors would look, and they would find defects on the car, and then they would circle it on this repair ticket, on this inspection ticket. The repairman would have to fix it. They would have some symbol specific to that repairman to say that this repairman did in fact fix that defect. They had these stations throughout the plant. In each station they used to have a little machine--well, periodically they used to have a machine not in each station. They used to read these repair tickets. At the end of the day it would blurb out a total of repair items per area. Prior to GMAD they had really minor repairs throughout the whole plant because it was to everyone's advantage not to have repairs because repairs bring people down. It was to the foreman's advantage because he just wanted to sit back and put in his time and go home. It was to the people's advantage because we realized we had to keep people off of the foreman's back because we had it made then as opposed to what we had four years ago. It was to the company advantage because they were in fact getting a quality product. It was still Fisher Body Chevrolet.

I can remember at that time I was putting in emergency brakes. You would go days where you would have one loose emergency brake the whole day of an eight or nine or ten hour span, not saying that you didn't have more, but the inspector might not have written it up. He might have just told the repairman that there was a loose one there and just to tighten it up and it wouldn't show up. It wasn't to the degree that it was later with GMAD and actually to the present day. It had almost reached a point now where they reach an acceptable amount of defects as opposed to manpower and as opposed to manning the operation.

If quality goes up to a certain level, then they cut manpower. Their reasoning is that if we can build a car this good with this amount of people, it is above and beyond their standards maybe so they can cut manpower and bring them back down to their status and build the car cheaper. That has basically been the viewpoint in the last five or six years. They have an acceptable level of defects. So to say that the J-car is going to be any better built or any worse built depends a lot on how well the car is engineered and management's attitude toward quality. If they have an acceptable level of defects as opposed to manning a line, then you are going to have basically what you have now. You are going to have some good cars and some bad cars and everything in between. It is just sort of an average.

S: Thank you very much, Mr. Liller.

END OF INTERVIEW