
Assembly line protest

INCIDENT

On Tuesday morning at 6 A.M., two young automobile assembly line workers, disgruntled over failing to get their supervisor transferred, shut off the electric power supply to an auto assembly line and closed it down at Consolidated Automobile Manufacturers, Inc.

The electric power supply area, containing transformers, switches, and other high-voltage electrical equipment, was positioned near the center of the plant in a 6 × 7 foot area. Enclosing this area was a 10-foot high chain-link fence with a locked gate of equal height, which together formed a protective cage around the facility and provided a measure of security.

The two assembly line workers, William Strong and Larry Kane, gained access to the electric power supply area simply by scaling the fence. Once inside, they halted the assembly line by opening the switches and cutting off the electrical power.

Strong and Kane, who worked as spot welders, took matters into their hands when the union's grievance procedure did not work fast enough to satisfy them. Fellow workers, idled by this dramatic protest and by the motionless assembly line, grouped themselves around the fenced area, shouting encouragement to the two men inside. In response, Strong and Kane were chanting, "When you cut the power you've got the power." They were in the process of becoming folk heroes to their fellow workers.

Sam Winfare, who supervised Strong and Kane and who was the target of the protest, had been supervisor for only a short time. In explaining the events that led to the power cage protest, Winfare said that production on the assembly line had been chronically below quota before he took charge. At the time Winfare was made supervisor, the plant manager had plainly told him that his job was to improve the production rate. Production had improved markedly in the short time that he was supervisor.

Winfare told the plant manager that his transfer would set a damaging precedent. "The company's action to remove me would create a situation where the operations of the plant were subject to the whims of any employee with a grudge," he said. This possibility was emphasized by the comment of a union steward who said there were other conditions in the plant that needed improving—such as the cafeteria food and relief from the more than 100-degree heat in the metal shop. Moreover, the steward said, there was at least one other supervisor who should be removed. He implied that, if successful, the power cage protest would facilitate attaining both these ends. The union steward's final comment was that two men on an unauthorized, wildcat strike might accomplish the same thing as a full-blown strike.

Each passing minute was costing the company a production loss of one automotive unit valued at \$6,000. The cost of each lost production hour, therefore, was \$360,000.

As he began a staff meeting, the plant manager felt stress and time pressure to accomplish two objectives: (1) to restore production on the motionless assembly line (but he was uncertain about the best way to do this), and (2) to develop policies for preventing future production interruptions by assembly line workers.