
On the Shop Floor: Multi-Ethnic Unity against the Conglomerate

I came to understand the complexities of today's industrial jobs for women when I took a job in 1977 in a large sewing plant that manufactured children's clothes in a New England city. During a period of five months (interrupted by a work stint in the plant's warehouse and two months' layoff), I was trained to "set sleeves" on little girls' dresses and toddler's t-shirts. The plant where I worked, like virtually all garment plants in the country, is paid on the piece-rate system.

As a new worker, I came to learn, not only the technical skills necessary for my job, but more important, how women workers deal with the piece-rate system and management's attempts to control their work and increase productivity. ✓

One of the first lessons I learned was an appreciation of the skills necessary to sew sleeves fast enough to be able to attain higher and higher levels of "efficiency" in the context of the firm's training program and the piece-rate system of pay. Even by August, after four months as a sewer, I was only making about "60 percent efficiency" and still had trouble learning to sew new styles of sleeves.

My field notes were filled with descriptions of mistakes I had made, of troubles with the sewing machine, and of spending my lunch hours

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Throughout the essay, the real names of the people have been changed.

repairing rejected sleeves. Most of my mistakes were a result of inexperience and trying to work faster under the pressure of having to increase my production and eventually "make the piece rate," or achieve 100 percent efficiency with a wage of \$3.31 an hour.

✓ A second set of lessons I learned were that women were not passive accepters of their situations but active strategists. On the shop floor there is a subtle conflict between management's attempt to control work and workers' attempts to preserve their own autonomy and maximize their own interests. I discovered workers' strategies for dealing with management policy by watching other women and by taking tips from them. I began to realize that women workers socialized new workers to see their shared interests, to develop a sense of trust, and to outguess management efforts to make them work harder. New workers were always being brought into the plant to be trained as sewers. In addition, at each change in style season, production often increased or decreased, and new garments were put into production. These changes meant considerable shifting of workers from job to job, or even layoffs. Both management and workers were always in the position of socializing workers to their respective views of work and production. I identified four strategies for dealing with shifting management policy: first, socializing new workers in the context of the training program; second, creating ties among workers in the face of ethnic conflict by humanizing and "familizing" the work context; third, socializing new workers to informal work rules within the department; and fourth, outguessing new management policy with regard to the organization of production and worker layoffs.

In a capitalist labor market, women are hired individually and placed in a job in accordance with management's assessment of their skills and production needs, without regard to their age, marital status, ethnicity, friends, or kin among the work force. During the course of working in the same department within a plant, workers develop both social ties and cultural understandings that bridge the gaps between individuals who were strangers and who are potentially divided by ethnic background, age, and marital status. Historians of women's work have called these social ties and cultural understandings a "women's work culture." The women's strategies I discuss here help both to create a work culture and to distance workers from management's views of production, creating an alternative. These are strategies of resistance, but they also create cohesive bonds between workers.

In a unionized shop, women's strategies of resistance, which focus on the day-to-day details of work and social relations, may parallel the formal union structure and strengthen it. Or the union may be a very weak institution, basically a set of officers and shop stewards who handle grievances but who have relatively little to do with the cohesiveness of the work force. In 1977 in the plant where I worked, the union seemed somewhere between these two extremes.

The union seemed barely visible in the day-to-day struggle with the

piece rate (although I did hear of several official grievances) and had not drawn Portuguese workers into active participation. Management notices were both in Portuguese and in English, while notices about union meetings and recent contract benefits were only in English. Union leadership was drawn primarily from the ranks of the older, non-Portuguese workers; and the union organized some social activities (a 20-Club lottery and a Christmas dinner-dance), but Portuguese workers seemed less involved in them. The wildcat strike which erupted in 1979 was probably a product of worker resistance against management, on the one hand, and the union's inactivity, on the other. Both Portuguese and non-Portuguese participated in the strike, eventually forcing the union to be more receptive to worker demands and eventually voting in new union leadership.

Daily resistance strategies and informal ties among workers are often fragile and elusive. There are many forces that tend to push women workers apart, since some workers become socialized to management's view rather than the alternative. And there are always occasions where ethnic conflict comes to the fore, breaking apart ties of solidarity between members of different ethnic groups. Whether informal resistance strategies can be transformed into more formal means of resistance (such as a successful union drive or a strong contract) depends on a host of factors including management's antiunion campaign, the nature of an industry, and the state of the local and national economy. Yet, the daily struggle between management's efforts to socialize workers to their own organization of work, and worker's strategies of resistance and attempts to socialize new co-workers, illustrates the potentials of women's work culture for initiating change.

THE SHOP FLOOR

The plant where I worked had been established in the 1930s when a manufacturer of children's wear moved his production facilities from New York to New England to take advantage of the work force made available by widespread mill closings in the textile industry. The plant was unionized in the 1950s and taken over by a large conglomerate in the 1970s. As the older women workers retired, rather than moving production facilities South, the management hired recent Portuguese and Latin American immigrants.

Much of the sewing took place on the second floor of an old silk mill which contained seven of the twelve departments. Work came down from the cutting room in lots of 80 to 120 dozen garments. At the row of machines close to the back of each department, women performed the first operations in the process: sewing the shoulder seams, neck bindings, and collars. As the bundles progressed to the front, other women attached labels, and then others joined the tops and bottoms of girls' dresses. Different workers set the sleeves and seamed the sides. Finally, across the center aisle, the garments were hemmed, pressed,

folded, and pinned. They were then taken off the floor to be boxed and sent to the distribution center, where shirts and pants were assembled into outfits and orders from across the country were filled.

The lots were divided into bundles of 2½ or 5 dozen garments, with smaller packets of sleeves, collars, sides, and other unsewn parts. On each bundle, a "ticket" specified the operations that had to be done to make a complete dress or t-shirt. Each operation had a number, and each style of garment had a pay rate for each operation. For Operation 37, "set sleeves," for example, the piece rates varied depending on the size of the garments in the bundle and on whether the garment was a dress or t-shirt.

Piece rates were based on the decimal system, so that they were easy to computerize. But they were also calculated to baffle the workers, since garments were batched in dozens and most sewers kept their eyes on a clock that ticks away in sixty-minute hours. In the official system, the hour is divided into 100 parts, so that 10 minutes is really .167 of an hour. Thus, a piece rate of .073 meant that an operation had to be performed on a dozen garments in 4.38 minutes if the sewer was to earn \$3.31 an hour in 1977 or \$4.05 an hour in 1979: both *base rates* on which the piece rates were figured. Following the example of our training instructors, I always used a pocket calculator (at home) to figure out how well or how badly I was doing, and I marveled at other workers who seemed to be able to translate all the decimal figures into real dollars and cents. I figured that to earn the minimum wage in 1977 (\$92.00 a week before deductions) by working all day on the same t-shirts with a rate of .073, I would have to sew a dozen garments (setting two sleeves each) every 6.3 minutes, completing 76 *dozen* garments in a day.

Women workers realized that the piece-rate system could be used against them. It induced individuals to speed up, which caused individualism rather than collectivism among workers, shortened the season by encouraging workers to get the work out faster and earlier, and lowered the wage by allowing rates to be based on the times of the faster workers. On the one hand, the piece-rate system forced the sewer to work as rapidly as possible without making a mistake. On the other hand, because of the way in which management enforced the system, women were under constant threat of being further underpaid (if the rates dropped) or having their jobs eliminated (if styles were simplified or operations cut out).

The women developed several strategies for dealing with the piece-rate system. First, they kept track of how many dozen pieces they had sewn each day, and they kept a sharp eye out for rates that were too low for the difficulty of the style. Each worker kept a little notebook in her machine drawer listing the number of bundles finished so that she could accurately fill out her punch card at the end of the day and recheck the amount on her paycheck when she received it on Thursday afternoon.

Second, women watched to see that cutting-room mistakes were not blamed on individuals and that individuals were treated fairly by the floor lady or the training instructor. In some instances, women covered over the mistakes of others by "just letting the work go through" so that a woman did not lose wages by having to do the work over.

These daily strategies for coping with the piece-rate system were, of course, taught to new workers. They were the most obvious strategies of resistance that emerged on the shop floor. New workers first encountered management views and organization of work as part of the training program, however, and only later did they begin to discover alternatives as they got to know older employees and were transferred from the training program to the shop floor.

SOCIALIZING THE WORKER THROUGH THE TRAINING PROCESS

The firm's training program was a worker's first introduction to sewing. Management used the program both to give the skills needed to become a sewer and to instill the correct attitudes toward work and toward the company. Training also provided a method of weeding out workers who "did not fit," because they either had difficulty gaining the skills or exhibited the wrong attitudes.

The conglomerate initiated the training program in January 1976 to standardize training in plants throughout the company. Each of the sewing operations was categorized as an A, a B, or a C job. A sewer was trained for an A job (neck binding, collars, sleeve bindings) in six weeks, for a B job (e.g., labeling) in twelve weeks, and for a C job (setting sleeves, seam sides, hemming) in eighteen weeks.

The training supervisor and her three bilingual assistants gave new employees a battery of tests and assigned them to a particular job. One of the training assistants taught the "new girl" a job (e.g., setting sleeves) according to a prescribed method (worked out by the supervisor). After about a week they placed the trainee in her future department, where they continued to monitor her work by an efficiency chart tied to her machine.

Use of bilingual instructors made the training program an extremely effective way of integrating Portuguese women into the production system. Since the trainer could act as a mediator if the "new girl" made mistakes that affected the work and wages of others, the program reduced conflict with older workers. It also helped control the high turnover rate by spotting and encouraging "good workers" while replacing those who left with a minimum of disruption.

Throughout the training program, the supervisor and her assistants worked toward reinforcing the company line about work. Lucia, a second-generation Portuguese woman and supervisor of the program, felt she was training girls to work as efficiently as possible, which was in both the company's and the workers' interest. "Let's face it. It's for the company, but it helps the girls make more money too." She ex-

plained that the company wanted to improve production and to save wasted motion. "You see some girls who *look* like they are working hard," she told me while imitating a girl shaking out a garment before sewing it, looking as if she were rapidly working, "but they are really wasting a lot of time. Others hardly look like they are working: it's almost automatic. *And they are the ones that are making money.*"

"Making money" was the code word in the culture of both management and workers for making over the minimum wage—in 1977 a vast terrain above \$2.30 an hour that was only limited by a worker's lack of experience from the management point of view. Lucia was always pointing out women who were doing well. After my fifth day at work, she told me I was improving (up to 37 percent efficiency) and that she was "proud of all her girls." "That little Spanish girl reached 100 percent and graduated (from the training program) just a couple of days ago." Christina, one of the instructors, told me about a woman who had just started the week before and was already up to 88 percent efficiency and already making \$22.00 a day. Accounts of women who were able to "make money" were held out as the ideal, and making money was the prize to be won by any worker who applied herself to the task at hand.

The training program during the peak of the season handled a large number of women, most of whom did not stay. For example, two of us started work on February 2, another six started the next Monday, and on Valentine's Day, fourteen showed up to be trained. Some women lasted only a few days. One, I remember, said that she had done badly on the tests they gave the first day—on purpose. She wanted an easy job, and she received one: gathering sleeves. She found it boring and did not show up the next day. Another trainee had worked for the company before, in the section where machines automatically embroidered designs on the clothes. She had not had previous experience sewing, and her reaction to the first day's tests were that they were "bullshit tests, just like in grammar school." These women clearly looked with scepticism on the training program, the management ideology of hard work, and the constraints of sewing; they quickly left the job.

Management used workers' personal qualities along with their inability to keep up with the pace of the training program to discourage trainees. Alice, a heavysset woman, was having a difficult time learning to set sleeves. Her efficiency had been up to 19 percent (about right for the second week of training) but had dropped to 11 percent when she received a difficult batch of sleeves to set. During the next week, she was called down to the nurse's office and told to take two baths a day and to use a particular deodorant since her body odors had been so offensive. Alice explained that because of her weight she perspired a lot and most deodorants did not work. She could not take a bath every day; with the weather as cold as it was, she did not want to catch a cold. "The awful thing is, they don't tell you directly; they told the nurse. It really hurt." And after she got home, she cried. She left the job soon

after, perhaps convinced that her boyfriend, who encouraged her to quit, would help support her, with the help of her food stamps.

Another example was Cindy, a young woman who had started the training program before I did and who was still in the training area long after I had been assigned to a department. On February 11 she said she was still in the same place and did not know why. "I really don't care how fast I go and sometimes I'm just fed up with the whole thing," she said. Two weeks later she had done several bundles of shirts all wrong and had to do them all over again. The next day she was "hauled down to the office" and told that she "must not want her job." If she did not improve, they would let her go. She was furious at the trainee supervisor (Lucia), who had stood quietly behind the production manager while he talked to her about her behavior.

Cindy said if she was doing something wrong, "I'd like to hear it from the bitch, herself. That bitch, I could punch her in the mouth. I've never met anyone like her. But then I'd lose my job for sure." She *had* done the shirts wrong but felt that the instructor had not checked her work. "They" also complained that she took too much time off from work and was always in the ladies room. "Well," Cindy said, "they told me that whenever I wanted, I could get up and go to the bathroom and have a cigarette." She insisted that she did not do this too often, but her supervisor countered, "She's in there all the time." The production manager gave her two days to shape up. He said he would see on Friday if she still wanted to keep her job. On Wednesday, she was working hard and had done twenty-nine dozen sets of sleeves by the end of the morning. Cindy continued to work until the layoffs a week later but declined to work at the warehouse and did not reappear in June when we were called back to the sewing operation.

The training program effectively weeded out workers like Alice and Cindy who were having difficulty working fast enough and with enough skill, but whose demeanor and attitudes also did not fit with the work environment. Cindy often did not care how hard she worked, and she was defiant, not willing to assume responsibility for her mistakes (which are very common in the first weeks of sewing). Lucia, the trainee supervisor, always had a cheery attitude and encouraged hard work, "sticking to it." In contrast, older workers were more cynical about the management view that hard work made it possible to "make money." They cautioned trainees not to accept management ideas, especially after a trainee was assigned to her permanent job on the sewing floor. Mrs. Januz, an older Polish woman, asked how a Polish trainee was doing. The instructor, Christina, said, "She's a smart girl and doing really well." Mrs. Januz retorted, "Pretty soon she'll be working really fast, but *she still won't be making any money.*"

The older workers in my department counseled me about the job itself, how to do it, and when not to get discouraged. Rose, who had been setting sleeves for twenty-two years, said, "It's a good little job . . . just

take your time and the speed will come to you." Several times when I was having trouble putting sleeves on inside out or not catching the first two inches of the sleeve, she encouraged me, saying that she had had the same difficulties at first. "Just keep going . . . it will come to you." At the same time she made no bones about her feeling that it was difficult to make money. "If you are satisfied with \$2.30 an hour, you'll do all right. You really have to push yourself to make more. . . . The one thing about this place is that the work is steady. . . . If you keep improving, it will be okay. As long as you do a dozen or so more each day."

While the trainee supervisor implied that an average worker was timed in setting the rates, older workers scoffed at this idea. Angela pointed out the management efficiency expert by saying, "That's the one we hate." When I asked whom he timed, she said, "They usually pick out the fastest girl. They're not dumb, you know."

✓ The piece-rate system itself pits workers against each other in a competitive race for wages. Women are fairly secretive about how much they are making. I sensed, however, that some of the rates were easier to make than others. In setting sleeves, I was told Rose made about \$3.00 an hour, whereas Angela and Anita seemed to be making more nearly the minimum wage. The women sewing tops and bottoms together were reputed to be making \$33.00 a day, or \$4.12 an hour. The rate on sides was also supposed to be good: "We fought hard to get them a high rate."

Worker attempts to put "new girls" straight about the realities of the way management enforces the piecework system was illustrated by the following incident. My instructor came by to tell me that my card indicated that I had done only 17 dozen sleeves the previous day. She thought there must have been some mistake, since I had been doing more like 36 dozen a day. My handwriting had been misread so that, for one style, only 2 dozen sleeves, rather than 24 dozen, had been counted. She wrote this down on her pad and left, presumably to correct the mistake in the office. Angela, thinking that the instructor had been criticizing the level of my work, gave me the following advice: "Don't let her tell you that 17 dozen isn't enough. She hinted at it, you know. She ought to try it sometime. The girl who used to be at your machine, she used to tell them."

Angela and Rose reminded me that my predecessor had quit because she could not make more than the minimum wage. She had reached a plateau in two or three months and just could not make any more. I explained that I had been told I would be able to make \$3.31 an hour (the base rate) by the end of my training period. Angela scoffed at this. "I've been here ten years and I don't make that." Rose said, "You tell them that if an *old girl* who's been here twenty-two years can't make that, then you can't do it." Angela concluded, "You just let what they tell you go in one ear and out the other. Just keep going along as best as you can."

Thus from the management perspective, the training program helped

give women workers the appropriate skills and weeded out those who could not acquire those skills fast enough, as well as those who did not have the appropriate attitudes toward their work. Older workers often blamed trainees for making mistakes and for making their own jobs more difficult or for interrupting their work by asking for help. They were also careful, however, to socialize trainees to a different view of the work and the piece-rate system. During the first few days at work, the trainee supervisor and her assistants were in frequent contact with the trainees and offered their view of working hard and making money. When the worker was placed in the department, she heard a different view: that it would be difficult to make over the minimum wage and that the piece-rate system often worked against you. Workers were cautioned to be wary of management promises.

HUMANIZING THE WORKPLACE

As a new trainee assumed her position in a particular department, she both felt the rapid pace of the work and met more and more of her fellow workers. I soon noticed relatively stable groups that met at the breaks and during the lunch period. These groups were formed among workers of the same age and ethnic group who worked near each other. The major division, between Portuguese and non-Portuguese workers, was created partly by the fact that most of the recent Portuguese immigrants did not speak English well, if at all. Those Portuguese speakers who mingled with non-Portuguese were either second-generation women or those whose command of English was fluent.

In some ways these small groups illustrated the ethnic divisions in the workplace—largely between Portuguese and non-Portuguese. But in addition there were often clusters of Continental Portuguese, as opposed to those from the Azores, and there were several groups of Polish workers, many of whom were first-generation immigrants. Women of second- and third-generation French, Italian, Irish, or English background were often part of mixed groups. For example, in our row of sleeve setters, Rose (a French Canadian) and Angela (an Italian) were the center of a little cluster that included another Italian woman (a pinner) and the quality-control woman (whose ethnic background I could not determine). In the department behind me, one lunch group included two Polish women and a French Canadian. Age was the most important divider among the non-Portuguese ethnics. The young, unmarried high school graduates formed a group of their own that included two girls of French Canadian descent, a second-generation Portuguese, and a girl who said she was of several different ethnic backgrounds, "Heinz 57 varieties," as she put it.

Women in these groups often expressed a fair amount of anti-Portuguese sentiment. A week after I started work, and on one of my first days in the department, Rose and Angela were upset that the two Portuguese sisters sewing tops and bottoms of dresses (the operation

just before ours) had not told them they were working on two different lots of the same style dresses. Rose and Angela had inadvertently mixed up the bundles from the two lots and later had to stop work to sort them out into different chutes. After explaining all this to me, Rose said, "I'm glad they are hiring some of our own kind [obviously referring to me]. There are too many Portuguese being hired now."

There were interethnic tensions around the piece-rate system as well. Employers hired Portuguese women because of their reputation as hard workers, and the Portuguese women fulfilled their expectations. Some workers thus saw Portuguese women as working too hard, sometimes cutting corners to keep their wages up or engaging in "rate busting." One worker commented that the Azorean woman sewing the elastic band that joined the top and bottom of dresses "ruined that job for everyone." In other words, she worked so fast that the piece rate was lowered, and the workers had to increase their output to make the same pay. "She doesn't miss a dime," and "She makes more money than anyone else on the floor," another worker commented. For their part, Portuguese workers often felt discriminated against and said that U.S. workers do not work hard enough.

The divisions apparent in the structure of break and lunch groups and in attitudes expressed within them were cross-cut by a number of ways in which women joined together around their family roles and life-cycle events. Workers celebrated marriages and the birth of children with showers, usually organized by a group of friends, who collected a small amount from members of the women's department or other acquaintances. The organizers then presented wrapped gifts as a surprise during the lunch break. Retirement celebrations were more extensive. Friends brought pastry and baked goods for morning break and a cake for lunch. Orders were taken for a fast-food lunch of hamburgers, cole slaw, potato chips, and pop. Retirements and sometimes showers were organized along department lines, often through the help, and certainly with the knowledge, of the management (i.e., the floor lady). In both the department-organized and friendship-based functions, the monetary contributions and the signatures on the card cut across ethnic lines.

Leslie's baby shower provides a good example of how such non-work-time events integrate workers of diverse ages and ethnic backgrounds. It was organized by her two friends, who collected the money from a wide range of women as well as from her department, and who went out to buy the gifts: a car seat, a high chair, and a baby carriage. During lunch break, they brought the huge, wrapped boxes down the center aisle and placed them by her machine and waited until she returned from the ladies room. Halfway down the aisle, she realized what was happening. Perhaps a little embarrassed by all the attention, she let one of her friends begin helping her open all the gifts. One of the Portuguese women picked up the yellow ribbon that came off the first package and pinned it on Leslie. She exclaimed, "Oh, Jesus," on open-

ing the gifts and finally pulled the card out to look at it. She thanked everyone, and newcomers to the crowd peered over others to see what the gifts were. "Let's see what we got you," the woman who served morning coffee said, while Leslie's floor lady looked on. More admirers came by as Leslie's two friends began to stuff the gifts back in their boxes. The buzzer rang, ending the lunch break and sending everyone scurrying back to their machines. Though organized by the clique of young high school graduates, Portuguese women in Leslie's department clearly had contributed to the gifts and stood by admiring them.

Rose's retirement party was an all-day event, and our work was almost more interspersed between the breaks than the other way around. We had prepared for the party by each contributing \$1.00 for Rose's gift and \$1.50 for a fast-food hamburger for lunch, all at times when Rose was not around to find out about the surprise celebration. The celebration began when our floor lady came around before the morning break and told us that they had the pastry all set out. We were to come to the table at the front of the department before the break. Just before the break, Edna, the floor lady, brought over a corsage for Rose—with blue bachelor buttons, red carnations, two little pink roses, some bridal wreath, and a multicolored bow. Rose seemed appropriately surprised. One of the young Portuguese women came over and gave Rose a congratulatory kiss, while one of the Portuguese girls gestured excitedly.

Edna motioned us over to eat the pastry, so we all lined up to get doughnut holes, doughnuts, and homemade coffee cakes. Edna presented Rose with two cards, which she opened. One contained about sixty dollars and was signed "From all the girls in Department #11," and the other contained about the same amount, "From all your Colleagues." The department card said, "Use this to kick up your heels and enjoy." Everyone spent the rest of their break enjoying the pastry in their usual groups, while Rose was surrounded by her usual clique of friends, discussing the last retirement party, which Rose herself had organized for her friend Angela.

The half-hour lunch break brought another round of partying, with the floor lady's assistant bringing each of us a paper bag with our hamburger. Angela, Rose's friend, arrived to join the party just as the buzzer rang, and everyone lined up near the floor lady's desk to get potato salad, cole slaw, potato chips, and soda pop. Again, everyone sat in their usual groups, but several women, both Portuguese and non-Portuguese, came by to talk with Angela or Rose. Angela had lots of tips to give out about retirement and said that she "missed the people more than the place," but, "you get used to it." After lunch, she made the rounds of the department, stopping by each machine and talking to each of her ex-co-workers, whether English or Portuguese speaking. One of the Portuguese workers brought over a picture of her grandson to show Angela. She traded stories about grandchildren with the head mechanic, a Portuguese man in his fifties. Her general comment on leaving was that she "missed all my girls." The mood of the whole day

was one of departmental festivity. In contrast to the underlying tensions between Rose and Angela, and some of their Portuguese co-workers, which had surfaced several times over the spring and summer months, the retirement party was an occasion for crossing ethnic lines and expressing, even across a language barrier, feelings of solidarity.

On other occasions women brought their family lives into the work situation, by showing family pictures to those who worked at nearby machines, by sharing news about an illness in the family, by discussing vacation plans, and by recounting an important event, like a wedding or confirmation. Showing pictures, usually during morning or afternoon breaks, enabled women to communicate across ethnic lines. Several weeks after I had started work in my department, Anita, an older Portuguese woman who set sleeves at the machine behind me, brought in her family pictures to show me. I had talked with her several times in my halting Portuguese about her children and grandchildren. She carefully showed me each picture and explained who each person was. She was particularly proud of the first-communion picture of her two granddaughters—a studio picture taken of them in their white dresses with curled hair topped with little white veils—“two little angels,” she said.

Other times, women showed family pictures to a wide variety of workers, their closest acquaintances as well as those around them with whom they may have only a nodding acquaintance. Several weeks after the summer vacation, Vivian brought to work her wedding pictures, taken during her trip to Portugal, where she married the man she had been engaged to for several years. During morning break, she showed them to our floor lady and her clique (including two of the pinners). Then she returned to her own Portuguese-speaking group and turned the pages for them, explaining who the godparents and various relatives were. Several Portuguese women came over from adjacent tables when they saw Vivian open the album, so she started her explanation over. Sharing the wedding pictures thus crossed ethnic lines and seemed appropriate as a follow-up to the wedding present the department had given her two weeks before.

When Lucille's sister died, we all heard immediately, guessing that something was wrong when she failed to show up for work one Tuesday morning. A sheet was circulated for each to sign and put down a contribution (usually twenty-five or fifty cents) for flowers. The following Monday, as Lucille came around to each person delivering their repairs, she thanked each one, greeting many with a kiss, even those who did not speak English well. Such department-wide expressions of support brought workers of different ethnic backgrounds together.

Celebrating special events and sharing family pictures “humanized” the workplace, bringing family life into the industrial setting. Almost all the collections were for life-cycle events (weddings, baby showers, retirements, and deaths), some of them specifically celebrating women-centered events (such as a marriage or a birth of a baby). In bringing

family life into the workplace, women workers made connections with others, making strangers into acquaintances, and within the circles of one's break group, making acquaintances into friends. In a work setting where the piece-rate system drove workers apart and where ethnic divisions were clear, with interethnic tensions just beneath the surface during everyday work, these events might be termed part of a strategy of worker consolidation.

SOCIALIZING THE WORKER THROUGH INFORMAL WORK RULES

Another set of strategies that united women involved the informal work rules devised to insure that the work was divided evenly. These rules arose from the clear understanding that the piece-rate system divided workers and could be used by individuals to "make money" unfairly, that is, at the expense of others. A worker's various tricks for getting more garments completed during the day were seen as "cheating." Forms of cheating included sewing only the small sizes in a lot and leaving the larger sizes for other workers, or reporting a fake number of dozens on the work card handed in at the end of the day.

One of the clearest examples of how these informal rules worked revolved around the informal agreement, among those of us who were setting sleeves, that everyone would "work by sizes." Two days after I was out on the shop floor, Rose, who had worked for the company for twenty years, told me how to work with different sizes to share the work more evenly. She said, "Well, you do a bundle of size 4 (the smallest size) and then an 8 (the largest size on t-shirts) and then a 5 and a 6, and kind of let the 7s go in between. Otherwise a girl might get a whole chute of 6- and 7-sized bundles and it will take her longer. This way, then each does her fair share." During my first months at work, the older workers often split up a lot for the whole line, filling a chute near our machines with the appropriate mix of bundles.

By the end of the summer, however, two of these workers had retired and a third had been moved to another job. Three or four new workers had appeared in the line, leaving only one of the Portuguese women and myself with a knowledge of the rule system. A running struggle developed over a two-week period in August shortly after a new Portuguese woman entered our department. Frieda and Vivian, both older women who were new to sewing, had been fighting about the size problem before the new trainee entered the scene. Vivian complained that she always did the larger sizes, which explained her low production (sometimes only twenty-five dozen a day). Frieda accused Vivian of doing all the size 4s in one lot. Other workers suggested that Frieda complain to the floor lady or ask the floor lady to give out the work. An older Polish woman tried to mediate, counseling Vivian to take some of each size and to have the floor lady give her the work.

I explained the size rules to Eva, the trainee, as soon as she sat down at her machine, as did one of the older workers who spoke both Por-

tuguese and English. Even the trainee instructor came in to make sure that Eva understood the rules. Things went fine for several days, until one afternoon, Vivian started sewing sleeves on a lot of pink dresses Eva had begun sewing earlier in the day. After rifling through the chutes of remaining dresses, Vivian accused Eva of taking all the bundles of size 4s. Then Carlotta, the label girl, checked with the floor lady to make sure there were only four bundles of size 4 in the lot and maintained that she had seen Eva doing all four bundles of size 4s. By afternoon break, it was clear that she had indeed done all the size-4 bundles, but in the end she only admitted to doing two of them. Finally, I sorted out the remaining bundles so that Eva would have more 6s and Vivian more 5s, trying to make up for the earlier inequality. After this and a number of other instances where Eva's mistakes were brought to the attention of her Portuguese-speaking instructor, the floor lady, and other workers, she began to be more careful about the size bundles she took, stacking her garments after completing the sleeves, and not mixing garments from several bundles into the same stack.

This shows how women worked to socialize new workers to an informal set of rules that would distribute the work fairly and thus alleviate some of the divisive competition that can develop under the piece-rate system. Both Portuguese speakers and non-Portuguese speakers enforced these rules, the Portuguese speakers explaining to those who spoke little or no English. Some women acted as mediators between disputing workers. At other times, management (the floor lady or the instructor or the trainee supervisor) was called in to repeat the rules or to work out an equitable solution. The rules were important in socializing Portuguese workers, many of whom came from rural small-holder backgrounds and who were used to working long, hard hours. In the factory context, the piece-rate system induced them to act on their rural values and push themselves as hard as possible to "make money." The socializing pressures of other workers, those who were more aware that the system could be used against them, allowing management to lower the rates, for example, began to alter the new worker's behavior, bringing her into line with others.

A final set of strategies, which I have labeled "outguessing the conglomerate," pertained to the workers' attempt to understand and react in a more unified way to changes in management policy.

OUTGUESSING THE CONGLOMERATE

During breaks and lunch, women often talked about recent management policy and what was happening in the workplace. Since the apparel industry is extremely seasonal, layoffs are frequent when work for one season is ending and before the orders for the next season come in. Thus the periods between style seasons prompt intense discussion about how or what management might do. Our plant had been bought by a conglomerate in 1974, which by 1977 had changed a number of

the top and middle management. We were concerned about the policies these new men would adopt.

In early March, as the end of the spring style season approached, rumors flew through the plant. Already several women had been laid off. Others had been sent to the warehouse to help with pinning, boxing, and filling the last spring orders. A woman who had worked for the company for seventeen years said, "There have never been layoffs like this before. It's this new company."

Some workers felt that there was some chance that the plant would close. Angela maintained that they had been working several months without a contract, and with a temporary extension. She suspected something funny was going on. "You know, they could just close up this place and move South." Even Christina, the instructor, felt there was some chance they would close the plant down and just use it for offices and part of the headquarters. "They are sending all the good work down South and leaving all the junk for up here." Other older workers also speculated about a shutdown. Angela said that wages down South were very cheap, about \$1.60 or \$1.70 an hour. Nancy, who did quality control for several departments, felt there was trouble coming. She was not in favor of a strike but said, "We'll have to fight for things." "We need them more than they need us" was her comment on a possible plant closing.

Both workers and lower level management felt that the new management was handling production badly. My floor lady blamed the sudden lack of work in early March on the engineers. "They aren't coordinated and don't seem to know what they are doing." I overheard her and the floor lady of the next department characterize a recent meeting with the "higher-ups" as "another bunch of bullshit." One older worker felt the management had planned badly. "They took so many girls on. They know how many lots they need to make each season. They could plan better, instead of taking lots of people on and then laying them off."

Such gossip and rumor trading was not just a matter of bad-mouthing the management. It served as part of a strategy for trying to outguess the management and to figure out what was going on in the absence of information management preferred to withhold. Outguessing the management included: socializing new workers to a sense that things were different and to be critical of management policies; speculating about what was likely to happen so that individuals could be prepared for layoffs or being shifted to new jobs because of lack of work and thus better manage the connection between their work and family lives; and spreading the word from one part of the shop to another so that workers who experienced management policy in isolated ways would understand that their situation might be part of a larger pattern.

Such outguessing had the effect of raising workers' consciousness and helping formulate work-related issues for the union. If the union did not respond, then such consciousness helped workers push the

union to be responsive. Several women from the warehouse raised a number of issues pertaining to the company's hiring and transfer policies in the warehouse at the union meeting in September 1977. The company had been hiring temporary workers through agencies (paying the agency \$4.50 an hour), which reduced the possibility of sewers or those working part time on the second shift transferring to the \$4.25-an-hour "order-picking jobs" at the warehouse. At the same time, hiring temporaries kept a segment of the labor force out of the union. The business agent maintained such a practice was against the contract, especially if there were permanent company employees who wanted work, and promised to look into the issue.

I do not know if this issue was resolved, but two years later, when the contract was being renegotiated, at least ninety local issues remained unresolved, including a number of grievances concerning piece rates. Just three days before the vote on the contract, a wildcat strike erupted. Workers from the knitting mill and warehouse apparently spearheaded the strike, but a number of sewers who called in sick the first day participated in a picket line for the next two days and even defied a back-to-work court injunction on the last day of the wildcat. Workers voted down the national contract by an overwhelming 834 to 118 votes, although it was accepted on a national level. The vote indicated both the severity with which management had stepped up its tactics to squeeze workers' wages and the workers' feeling that the union had not been dealing effectively with these new policies. As one worker said, "The union won't fight for us. The union's the company" (*Providence Journal*, Wednesday, September 5, 1979).

CONCLUSIONS

I have emphasized that women are active strategists at work. Their attitudes are conditioned in the workplace itself, through a day-to-day struggle against a pay system that divides workers from each other (by pushing them to make money individualistically) and against management manipulation of that system which, over the long run, operates to keep the wage bill down. I have emphasized worker strategies that are aimed at socializing other workers, making them sceptical of management ideology concerning the benefits of the piece-rate system, and making them aware that management may work to cut pay, eliminate jobs, keep workers out of the union, or lay off sewers.

Women industrial workers come from a wide variety of age, marital, and ethnic backgrounds, and the piece-rate system exacerbates and sharpens these divisions, often playing on prejudices, especially against recent immigrants who do not speak English. Celebrations of life-cycle events and the "familizing" of the workplace, on the one hand, and the socialization of workers to an informal set of work rules, on the other, both operate, though in different ways, to bridge those ethnic divisions.

The effectiveness of the wildcat strike in all departments of the

plant also illustrates the themes I have developed in this essay. Neither the piece-rate system nor ethnic divisions stifled worker protest. Production-related strategies such as the informal work rules softened the competitive effects of working on piece rates, while the nonproduction strategies, nourished by women's collective celebration of life-cycle events, blunted ethnic hostility.

These strategies indicate that women, including recent immigrant women, are not passive accepters of management tactics but engage in day-to-day struggle to maintain and even improve their economic situation against very impressive odds. ✓