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New industrial competition has led major automobile manufacturers to re-analyse their approaches to business strategy and industrial relations. This article examines attempts at Ford Motor Co. to adopt its traditional approach to work organisation to its changing business environment.

The failure of the Western economies to reverse their deteriorating economic performance has increasingly called into question the organisational and technological basis of the long post-1945 boom—Fordism[1]. The emblematic significance of the Ford company derives from the seminal role of Henry Ford in systematising an organisational system which became coterminous with modern large-scale factory production in general. The main elements of Fordism are well-known; the progressive development of specialised machinery operated by closely supervised, deskilled labour to mass produce a standardised product for stable, homogeneous mass markets. In a market place where cost reduction was crucial to competitive advantage radical product and process innovation was systematically sacrificed in favour of efficiency[2]. The self-reinforcing momentum of this deskilling strategy defined maximising control rather than eliciting consent as the fundamental managerial imperative. The result has been a distinctive stress on upholding managerial prerogative with the emphasis on direct control and motivation by external factors such pay[3].

The Ford Motor Company itself has developed the quintessential form of Western management; namely, a managerial structure based on strict functional responsibilities within a large-scale bureaucracy. In this hierarchical system decision-making is an inflexibly top–down process based on exhaustive analysis of policy options measured against a yardstick of short-term financial returns[4]. In short, Ford's management structure and culture have stressed continuity, caution and control, factors eminently suited to a slow-changing market environment and incremental innovation in product and process technologies. Rapid shifts in product markets have forced Ford to reconsider the established verities of decades of profitable production, a process of critical self-examination unprecedented in the corporation's history.

Such is the general disenchantment with Fordism that Piore and Sabel's influential text, *The Second Industrial Divide*, has suggested that a rapid disintegration of previously stable mass markets has resulted in

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the virtual obsolescence of mass production[5]. In this interpretation of long-wave industrial development, sustainable prosperity hinges on the adoption of 'flexible specialisation', the most technologically dynamic and humane of a series of alternative successors to Fordism. Only those companies and nations which adopt holistic industrial policies meshing niche marketing across associated product families and the novel productive capabilities of programmable technologies operated by committed, upskilled workforces can achieve a durable competitive advantage. While critics have dismissed such ideas as empirically ill-founded there is growing evidence that notions of 'flexibility', however ideologically loaded, are being widely appropriated by manufacturing managements in their diagnosis of product market segmentation and work organisation[6].

It was a conjunction of market, technological and ideological factors which stimulated Ford's current efforts to 'Japanise'[7] work organisation and labour relations. Our concern is to demonstrate that for Ford the long-term 'Japanisation' of labour relations is an integral element of corporate competitive strategy and that the very novelty of this strategy has limited its immediate impact. The attempt to reconcile Ford's short and long-term objectives has meant that the company is currently negotiating a major transition period; on the one hand, striving to introduce aspects of 'Japan-like' industrial organisation in preparation for future strategic change whilst, on the other, maintaining established managerial practices and work organisation patterns essential to current competitiveness. In a series of thirty structured interviews with senior managers within Ford Europe and, at operational level, Ford UK, we investigated the evolving agenda for labour relations change in the company and the internal and external sources of the change strategy, the political strength of its principal proponents and opponents and the perceived links between marketing, production and labour relations strategies.

Continuity and change in Ford's industrial relations

One of the major barriers to change in Fords has been the legacy of the company's chequered industrial relations history. Ford's dubious inheritance of low trust labour relations is superimposed on the inherent conservatism of the British car industry whose combination of competitive multi-unionism and sectional shopfloor bargaining tends to dissipate radical initiatives. As Tolliday has demonstrated, one dimension of Ford's distinctiveness in the British industry has been the company's pursuit of coherent labour relations strategies, suitably amended to reflect changes in the economic, legal and political environment[8]. In this section we shall argue that the current phase in Ford's industrial relations strategy represents a sharp break with previous policies rather than an evolutionary development.

From its arrival in Manchester in 1911 Ford mounted a vigorous anti-union campaign which successfully excluded trade unions from their factories until the end of World War 2. In these years, working conditions inside the Ford plants were primitive and supervisory discipline harsh and unyielding. Faced with an increasing number of disruptive, minor disputes Ford finally conceded union recognition. From 1945 to the late 1960s Ford attempted to maintain a collective bargaining regime which dealt exclusively with national trade union leaderships, ignoring shop stewards. Inevitably, unpredictable eddies of shopfloor turmoil developed beneath the relative calm of official collective bargaining. The slow disintegration of Ford's policy of union containment accelerated during the 1960s[9]. Labour shortages and high turnover levels undermined the company's selective recruitment policy while the company's young, restless workforce posed immense disciplinary problems for supervisors accustomed to exercising arbitrary control[10]. The bitter industrial conflicts which shook the car industry between 1968 and 1972 finally undermined Ford's attempt to limit collective bargaining to senior union officials. For Ford, the modernisation of their labour relations system through the incorporation of shop stewards in collective bargaining was the adoption of a pragmatic industrial pluralism. The appointment of Bob Ramsey as Director of Industrial Relations in 1973 symbolised the company's belated rejection of 'the Ford industrial creed' of paternalism and direct control[11]. From the mid-1970s, winning employee endorsement of collective agreements was regarded as essential to the long-term stabilisation of labour relations and enhancing

productivity. However, the coherence of Ford's national strategic initiatives stood in sharp contrast to plant management's insistence on unilateral managerial control. The resulting running battles at plant level seriously hampered production continuity and threatened to become a critical competitive handicap. This experience forced Ford executives to finally recognise that structural reforms of internal bargaining institutions alone were insufficient to sustain a profound process of organisational change. The task for Ford's senior management was to devise structures and processes which would not only involve shopfloor representatives in maintaining collective agreements but also to qualitatively extend this principle to include informal responsibilities for productivity and innovation.

Organisational change at Ford

The primary impetus for change at Ford arose from the growing incursions of Japanese manufacturers into the corporation's core American and European markets. Moreover, the 'new industrial competition' from Japan altered the basic contours of competition by introducing new standards of product quality and design[12]. Ford's response has been to increase the variety of model derivatives, compress the response time between marketplace and production and to generate internally a heightened awareness of product design as a critical competitive factor. For Ford UK such competitive pressures were exacerbated by lacklustre productivity and poor quality compared to Ford's European plants[13]. If Ford UK's first strategic goal was to reduce the company's breakeven point by rationalisation and increased efficiency then the second was to lay the organisational foundations necessary for competitive edge in the 'new industrial competition'. In short, Ford's confronted its productivity dilemma head-on: how to reconcile increased efficiency without stifling innovative potential. It is this double awareness, of the productive and innovative advantage enjoyed by Japanese car producers, which has determined the pattern of organisational change in Ford during the 1980s.

The 1980s have witnessed both change and continuity in the company's industrial relations strategy. Historically, major shifts in the strategy have been essentially reactive, policies of containment triggered by shopfloor unrest. In contradistinction, the current phase was activated by a self-consciously proactive management approach whose aim is to enable, rather than foreclose, the possibilities of organisational change. The greatest change has been Ford's efforts to develop a co-operative industrial relations environment which will enable, perhaps even accelerate, strategic change and work reorganisation. The uncertainty inherent in this open-ended reform process is tempered by Ford's resolve to maintain managerial hegemony in the workplace through the retention of a tight disciplinary code.

Two major change strategies distinguish the 1980s. The first, 'After Japan', was the direct response to the company's new awareness of the Japanese competitive edge. Its limited success is attributed by senior management to union resistance and a mishandled implementation process. The second, and continuing, change initiative centres around Employee Involvement, a labour relations strategy with distinctive Japanese features and Participative Management, both imported from the US.

After Japan

After Japan (AJ) was Ford's initial response to the Japanese advantage following a trip to Japan by Bill Hayden, Ford Europe's President, from which he reportedly returned in a state of shock[14]. Until Ford's first foray into the small car market with the Fiesta launch in 1977 the company ignored the Japanese cost advantage. AJ represented a transformation of Ford's conception of the Japanese challenge as being based on cheap labour and a sheltered domestic market. Central to AJ was the recognition that the Japanese management style was diametrically opposed to the Western model, the key being management by consent rather than control, to mobilise worker knowledge behind company goals rather than to eliminate all vestiges of worker discretion. Backed by the full political muscle of the American mother company, Ford of Europe introduced quality circles in 1979 with the threefold objective of improving manufacturing productivity; stimulating motivation and involvement on the shopfloor; and providing an informal forum for communication between management and labour[15]. If the Japanese vision of AJ represented a gigantic

leap in corporate imagination then implementation betrayed strong continuities with Ford's deeply entrenched one-dimensional understanding of organisational change as the unproblematic outcome of structural reform. Initially, Ford envisaged the introduction of quality circles as the first step in the rapid 'Japanisation' of the company; from training the workforce in problem-solving and inter-personal skills to *kanban* and more stable relations with component suppliers. In the UK AJ foundered on union resistance to quality circles. For the manufacturing unions, quality circles threatened to by-pass existing bargaining institutions by subsuming work organisation issues far beyond quality improvement. The chastening experience of AJ forced Ford's to abandon their grand vision of wholesale 'Japanisation' and to adopt a more pragmatic, long-term approach to organisational change. The company's long history of adversarial, low-trust industrial relations necessitated a gradual, processual approach to modifying company culture rather than structural reorganization alone. In itself, this was a major advance in managerial understanding of the change process and one which has informed subsequent company strategy. Since AJ Ford has pursued a twin track change strategy: on the one hand, pushing through rationalisation and efficiency measures by traditional top–down methods; on the other, pursuing a more complex, longer-term approach based on building more consensual management–labour relations. At the same time the company is determined to safeguard its managerial prerogative. This is most apparent at factory level where supervisory authority is underwritten by strict rules which state that should any workgroup refuse to accept supervisory direction pending fuller consultation then they are automatically suspended, risking knock-on lay-offs in adjacent work stations[16].

Employee involvement

The successor to AJ's failed attempt to introduce quality circles is the continuing Employee Involvement (EI) initiative. Ford conceptualise EI as a long-term trust-building exercise with time horizons of ten to fifteen years[17]. Progress is necessarily slow and subject to abrupt reversal. As one senior Industrial Relations manager put it, 'trust is slowly building (although) it is a case of two steps forward, one backwards'. The structures of EI have, as yet, been accepted only by salaried staff. Shopfloor unions have abstained from the EI programme which they regard as contrary to the established contractual job-control orientation of workplace trade unionism. The mixed reception to the EI initiative illustrates the enormous obstacle to negotiated change posed by competitive multi-unionism in the British auto industry[18]. Ford's industrial relations strategists regard the work reorganisation process initiated by the 1985 Pay and Working Practices Agreement as a breakthrough in their efforts to diffuse the principles of EI informally. The traditional pattern of industrial bargaining in Ford involved securing local compliance with centrally-struck agreements. Significantly, Ford's senior management regard the 1985 Agreement as breaking this pattern, opening up space at plant level, not for conflict, but for trust-building through the change process, *outside* formalised collective bargaining channels[19]. It is this potential for mobilising worker commitment to change which makes the Agreement a landmark in Ford's industrial relations.

The essential backdrop to the 1985 Agreement was the closure of the Dagenham foundry which ended fully integrated production at the company's heartland. The diminishing impact of AJ's productivity comparisons between UK and continental plants on labour relations was massively enhanced by the 'cold shower of realisation' which followed the Dagenham closure: 'about that time we started to get cooperation because a lot of employees suddenly realised that what had happened at the foundry could happen to them too'[20]. Essentially, the 1985 Agreement established an enabling framework for work reorganisation with the short-term aim of closing the gap between British and continental production practices. The Agreement's underlying rationale reflected the lessons derived from the AJ campaign and Ford's assimilation of Japanese techniques. Two elements were identified as central to Ford UK's relatively poor productivity: interruptions to continuous production and an unfavourable ratio of direct to indirect workers. In Ford UK, the number of production workers was equalled by indirect employees performing inspection and ancillary tasks. By contrast, in Japan all these tasks were performed inside the work

cycle. The key work organization elements of the 1985 Agreement were: versatility and flexibility, the acquisition of new skills and the elimination of inefficient demarcation lines. The Agreement sought to dismantle both Ford's own rigid bureaucratic categorisation of semi-skilled work and the craft demarcations it inherited from the history of British craft unionism. These principles were applied to both craft and production operatives. The Agreement defined flexibility as: 'Electrical and mechanical craftsmen must be flexible and versatile across the full range of their respective skills, undertake any electrical or mechanical tasks outside their own trade, subject to capability; undertake tasks such as the preparation of machinery or equipment prior to maintenance work, slinging, the operation of lifting equipment, and driving, where these are feasible. Such hybrid craftsmen must also carry out line patrol, taking corrective actions as they identify the need; and be mobile across a plant, or operation'[21]. In semi-skilled work Ford implicitly challenged the deskilling logic of fifty years of bureaucratic control; 500 job titles were reduced to 50. In particular, an expanded production operative category enveloped 86 job titles. Production operators' roles and responsibilities were expanded: their tasks varied according to operational needs and additional responsibilities for indirect work such as minor maintenance, using quality assurance techniques and repairing defects. In return for accepting the new Agreement line workers received an 18.5% pay increase.

Ford had been seeking such changes from the beginning of the 1980s but had been as unwilling to pay for them as the unions were to negotiate flexible work principles. Wage increases were explicitly linked to efficiency gains[22]. Ford derived a triple efficiency gain: securing additional manpower flexibility, increased intensity of capital useage and greater continuity of production. Ford has maintained firm control over work reorganisation to check the increased worker autonomy implicit in the process both through traditional supervisory channels and the introduction of computerised measurement procedures[23]. Overall, the changes mark a shift of emphasis, a hesitant, but significant, movement away from the Fordist paradigm of task fragmentation and a hugely elaborate and rigid division of labour. The key point is not that Ford have entirely renounced mass production, rather that the company is deliberately experimenting with notions of flexibility which are alien to the principles of classical Fordism.

The final strand of the broad sweep of changes introduced by EI has been a new approach to quality. 'Quality' in this sense is an umbrella concept encompassing non-price factors such as design, reliability and service. To be quality-conscious is, therefore, to utilise consumer definitions of product acceptability along these dimensions, not those of the production engineer. Moreover, prime responsibility for shortcomings in manufacturing quality was attributed to management rather than the workforce, to work planning rather than execution. In turn, this approach entails a fundamental change in quality measurement away from inspection and rectification, and a constant search for improved product design and manufacture based on zero defects. Ford's post-1980 approach to quality concentrates on translating customer expectations into production protocols. Unlike quality control, a fundamental of a low-trust factory regime, quality assurance requires the active involvement of production workers. Again, while Ford stress that the dissemination of a common 'quality' language enables an informed dialogue between management and labour the company closely monitors productivity, particularly in capital intensive areas of the labour process[24].

There are sound financial reasons why Ford consider EI a long-term investment, rather than a short-term expedient. Paul Roots, Ford UK's Director of Industrial Relations, defends the company's cautious approach: 'Ford has always differed in important respects from other car firms, notably in its profitability, and the company has had less need of dramatic change than have some other firms. It is wary of making sudden moves that could undermine its progress, and seeks continued change as part of a considered programme of development'[25]. For Ford, the prime virtue of slow change is that it permits the retention of the organisational bases of the company's current market strength and profitability, a virtue which far outweighs the inevitable tensions between the long-term goal of employee involvement and the short-term necessity of maintaining shopfloor discipline. Nevertheless, the emergence of 'a new philosophy' in Ford's labour relations policy

has had a significant impact on senior company strategists[26]:

> 'The IR fraternity is starting to ask itself questions like "Are we policemen or are we supposed to be innovators in terms of creating a work climate in which people can fulfil their own ambitions and gain self-awareness?" In a twenty year career in IR in Ford Motor Company I haven't heard that sort of question until the last 18 months. "Are we policemen or innovators?" '

Participative management

The obverse of EI is Participative Management (PM), whose main goal is to change managerial attitudes and inflexible organisational structures. If Ford's over-rigid hierarchical structure was unable to keep pace with increasingly rapid market movements then its narrow functional accounting procedures hindered the development of an integrated approach to organisational innovation. PM has two main themes. First, to simplify management control systems, devolve authority and increase operational responsibility and accountability by developing self-contained organisational units. By broadening managerial spans of control Ford hopes to narrow the distance between strategic and operational priorities. Secondly, the company wants to break down barriers between management groups which regard collaboration as a necessary evil, a process in which the first priority is the protection of vested interests. For Ford, overcoming this emphasis on short-term budgetary criteria reflects the historic dominance of the financial function within the company throughout an era in which the primary competitive dimension was cost and success measured in market share rather than value added and profitability. The success of Ford's strategic shift away from the mass production of utility vehicles towards a product spectrum targetted at specific market segments hinges on the integration of design, manufacture and marketing[27]. Unlike the cost-paring ethos which dominated the Fiesta design process, the Sierra project, culminating in the 1983 launch, was based on a matrix structure designed to combat the inertial qualities of functional boundaries. The industrial engineer assumed a focal role in the integration of marketing and engineering in product development. However significant to a particular project, such experiments in PM have had only a marginal impact on Ford's routine organisation. So deeply embedded is the inherited bureaucratic culture that PM, instilling 'a whole new way of thinking', remains 'a task for a generation', rather than the accomplishment of a specific campaign, however ambitious [28].

Conclusion

The failure of AJ in the context of the British industrial relations system forced Ford UK to retrench, to introduce the long-term EI/PM strategy with the more realistic time horizons of five to ten years. In itself, this constituted a sharp break with Ford's traditional understanding of organisational change in strictly functional terms. The inertia of British labour relations institutions has compelled Ford to accept that overcoming the legacy of chronically low trust industrial relations is necessarily a slow process. Against this backdrop, Ford's recent abortive attempt to establish single unionism in its proposed Dundee plant under the aegis of the American mother company is best understood as an extension of, rather than cavalier deviation from, established strategy. It perhaps represents with its emphasis on flexibility as a core element of its industrial relations package the face of the future but it has to be added that managers in Ford UK and Ford Europe express a sense of unease with the handling of this abortive episode, particularly its timing, by the American mother company. It is also important, in considering the significance of the Dundee episode, to bear in mind the possibility that the final withdrawal from Dundee had as much to do with financial, particularly exchange rate, as industrial relations issues. However, the late 1988 decision to locate the new engine plant at Bridgend, with union agreement, may have reversed the damage done by the Dundee negotiations.*

Crucially, Ford regards the process of changing work organisation as a vital arena for the long-term renegotiation of the

* One also has to note in this connection the more recent decision to transfer Sierra production from Dagenham to Genk in Belgium. It is too early to speak definitively about the significance of this decision but it does seem to indicate a reduction in Dagenham's strategic importance. Among the reasons the company gave for the decision was the need to further increase the plant's performance in terms of quality, volume and cost targets was paramount[29].

psychological contract between the individual worker and the company. While classical Fordism survives in the company's assertion of the right to manage, buttressed by a strict disciplinary code, the 1980s have witnessed a qualified, but significant, reversal of the job fragmentation rationale which has underpinned company policy since its foundation. But, as the 1988 stoppage demonstrated, even the most hesitant, gradual transition from the principles of mass production is likely to come to a sudden, jarring halt if corporate management attempt to force the pace of change. The speed with which a wide range of issues percolated to the surface of what was ostensibly a dispute about wages and the duration of the collective contract struck between company and the unions highlights the dual nature of Ford's labour relations strategy. Almost immediately the conflict involved not just contractual issues but also the speed and uncertain impact of the 'Japanisation' process, from the balance between permanent core and temporary peripheral workers to the unsettling juxtaposition of tight discipline and raised expectations of improved trust relations on the shopfloor. The 1988 strike was, therefore, a by-product of Ford's twin-track labour relations strategy. Yet, while it is too early to judge the impact of the two-year agreement finally struck in 1988, it is clear that its principles embody a significant building upon the 1985 Agreement, particularly in the continuing emphasis on flexibility and the new emphasis on team working with enhanced responsibility for production control matters.*

To return to our starting point: it is not sufficient to dismiss the putative demise of mass production with reference to the limited incidence of post-Fordist patterns of work organisation in Britain. However ill-defined the notions of 'flexibility' and 'Japanisation' now emerging as dominant themes of the managerial lexicon may be they are having a considerable impact on managerial marketing and work organisation strategies. To a certain degree, this ideological bandwagon has developed its own momentum. More importantly, this shift in managerial discourse reflects shifts in the constitution of product markets and the novel possibilities offered by programmable production technologies. The slow disintegration of Fordism has been stimulated by the uneven decomposition of mass demand for standardised goods coupled with high rates of product innovation and enabled by the advent of flexible capital equipment accompanied by organisational patterns derived from Japanese industry. The changes analysed in this paper indicate the direction some of the crucial change areas into which attempts to move 'beyond Fordism' will lead us.

* Also likely to be important is the Employee Development and Assistance Programme announced in late 1988[30]. This represents a significant attempt by the company to introduce non-pay benefits in the form of funding for personal development through participation in education courses, to be run in addition to the job-related training programme, and the provision of paramedical services designed to promote healthier lifestyles. The scheme is similar to the one enthusiastically endorsed in the USA by the UAW and links to the ongoing attempt to promote Employee Involvement through the human resource management emphasis on an organizational culture of collaboration and training.

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