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Dismantling Detroit

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Op-Ed Contributor

Detroit

TO get to the auto plant that I've been drawn to for much of the last year, I drove, on my lunch hour last Monday, past an auto plant that members of the press had been drawn to for a full 45 minutes. As I drove east from midtown Detroit along I-94, the Ford Freeway, I could see a helicopter ahead, circling the General Motors Detroit/Hamtramck assembly plant — “Poletown,” in these parts. TV news crews were parked outside it, to cover the strike that had begun at 11. I exited the freeway to see a dozen or so strikers, a handful of Detroit police officers and a couple of people holding tape recorders interviewing a couple of others holding picket signs. The United Auto Workers had called a national strike against G.M., and Poletown, for the press, was the place to be.

Back on the Ford Freeway I continued east, past the abandoned Packard plant, empty for half a century now, on my way to a more recently shuttered factory just up the road. I was pretty sure there'd be no TV crews at the Budd Detroit plant. Built in 1919 by the Liberty Motor Company and bought by the Budd Company in 1925, it had been a parts supplier, producing brake drums, wheels (old-timers still call it “Budd Wheel”) and auto body stampings for the major car companies. For eight decades, it supplied jobs to the city and the industry that drove the expansion and symbolized the strength of the American middle class — a class, the striking U.A.W. workers rightly asserted, that they were proud to belong to and didn't want to see disappear.

The Budd plant — latterly, the ThyssenKrupp Budd plant — helped shape the contours of Detroit's 20th century. Literally: in the 1950s, Budd Detroit built and assembled the body of the iconic, two-seat Ford Thunderbird. Last December it closed, and this past summer I spent much of my free time at the plant, observing workers from General Rigging disassemble it.

I wasn't “press,” not here. In the Budd plant, “press” means stamping presses, and many of them still stand, a couple of stories high, in numbered lines of half a dozen presses each. A Spanish auto supplier, Gestamp, has bought 16 Line for one of its Mexican plants. A couple of Mexican engineers from Gestamp, along with German engineers from Müller Weingarten, the press maker that Gestamp contracted to oversee the 16 Line's installation in Mexico, have been observing the disassembly. “Their role is to stand there, in awe, and hope they can put it back together when they get it to Mexico,” said Duane Krukowski, General Rigging's electrical foreman.

If the picketers I'd passed a few miles back, with their demands for job security, were trying to counter the effects of globalization, Francis Blake Sr., the owner of General Rigging, embraced it. In addition to Mexico, press lines had gone or were going to India and Brazil. “None of it's staying here,” Fran said, “here” being not just Detroit, but America.

Fran's foreman on the Budd Detroit dismantling is Matt Sanders, an affable fellow in a Stars-and-Stripes hard hat. General Rigging had just completed a smaller job at a plant in Upper Sandusky, Ohio, owned by Tower Automotive, the bankrupt auto parts supplier, and had moved on to another Tower plant in Kendallville, Ind.

This process has been likened to the clear-cutting of a forest. The forest, in this case, spreads through parts of Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York State, and goes by the name of the American Rust Belt. Whether anything will grow back is unclear. What is clear is that dismantling America's industrial infrastructure has become a growth industry.

"I get no pleasure from taking these places apart," Matt said to me more than once this summer, exhaling cigarette smoke. Tower Automotive's new owner, Cerberus Capital Management, also owned the Chrysler assembly and engine plants that bookend the Budd plant. Despite himself, Matt couldn't help but speculate on which stamping plants Cerberus might decide to close.

While the Big Three seek to shed workers, Matt is always looking for bodies. "When can you start?" he asked when we first met. Some of the older guys on the crew are former U.A.W. members, and the younger guys, in an earlier era, might well have been Big Three workers. Yet even they seemed to realize that by working the Budd job they were part of something historic. Still scattered about the plant were Frisbees and buttons bearing the logo for U.A.W. Local 306, and this message: "I Believe in Budd Detroit."

"See you Saturday?" I said to Matt on my way out. "I'll be here," Matt said.

On my way back downtown, I saw that the picketers in front of Poletown remained, but the news crews had departed. A day and a half later, the strike would be over, and among the reported U.A.W. concessions was the acceptance of a two-tier wage structure, one that could pay new workers as little as \$12 to \$15 an hour. That means that a young worker starting out could conceivably make as much taking an auto plant apart as he could working in one. It'd be dirty work, occasionally dangerous and done without union backing, much like auto work had been before the U.A.W.

"I want to be here to take this apart," Duane, General Rigging's electrical foreman, said to me this summer. He considered the Budd plant holy. "I used to work at Ford's," he said, applying the possessive, as working-class Detroiters do, "and I got laid off from Ford's. What they did was, they built a new assembly line. One day, we went over for a tour of the new line, and they showed me a machine that was doing my job. This was in 1979. They turned the lights out, and the machine was still doing the job. So I said to myself, 'Now I need to learn how to build machines.' Which is why I'm here taking them apart. Because I know how to put them together. Now I'm 50 years old, and I wouldn't give up being here for nothing."

Paul Clemens is the author of "Made in Detroit: A South of 8 Mile Memoir."