

# **Quality Assured: Autoworker Stories from the Chrysler Newark, Delaware Assembly Plant**

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***In memory  
of my grandfather,  
Thomas F. Sheehan  
a shop steward for Teamsters Local 82, South Boston chapter***

## TRANSCRIPT OF THIS AUDIO PIECE

### **Narration:**

The [oral history collection at the University of Delaware](#) houses several interviews with former employees of the Chrysler auto plant in Newark, Delaware. The plant was built in 1951 to make tanks for the Army and started producing consumer vehicles in the late '50s. The interviewees are college students, who meet with their interviewees—retired plant workers—in the Spring of 2011, three years after the Chrysler plant has been shut down for good.

These auto workers have their own thoughts about foreign competition, manufacturing, management, union relations and the big boss. At times, these interviewees are wistful for the camaraderie they were able to share with fellow Chrysler workers; at other points, they are grateful to be done with factory work. They speak bluntly about the dangers of physical labor and the toll that such labor took on their relationships with spouses and children. But, again and again, workers point out the stability of these jobs, the generous health benefits, the opportunities for overtime.

In a so-called post-industrial or deindustrialized era, these audio interviews offer the listener a glimpse into a different way of life, with all its presumptions and modalities, as these interviewees, who are called narrators in the academic community, speak from 2011 to those of us in the current day who may contemplate futures more precarious.

First of all, what was so special about the Newark plant? The plant was known within Chrysler as a place that produced quality vehicles. The Newark plant was one of only a few plants that produced the K-car, an innovative platform that was introduced in 1981 and marked a turning point for Chrysler, as the company moved forward from its federal bailout in 1979-1980. The facility sat on almost 300 acres and, in September 1980, was employing 5,300 workers. At one point, Chrysler was paying over \$12 billion in taxes for this location. As for the workers, getting a job at the plant was a big step forward for them. One employee, [Bill Mariano](#), felt as if he'd won the lottery by getting a job at the plant in 1969.

**Mariano:** *But the first night I walked in Chrysler, I went from \$1.45 an hour to \$3.54 [an hour]. Now to me, a young boy coming outta rural West Virginia, I was rich.*

*You know, I, I, I walked through that plant and I kept telling myself, "All you gotta do every day is come to work and do what this company wants you to do and you can make a good living here. 'Cause you're already making twice what you are making down there." Of course, I had to pay union dues, which I didn't have to do down there, and I had to pay certain fees and things.*

*But I got hospitalization, I got healthcare, which, anybody knows this day, even back that day was a substantial pay in itself. If you ever got sick or you—like me, I eventually got married and*

*had kids and, and the healthcare part of it really came in handy lots of times when you had to, you know, when my wife had babies, they paid for that.*

*When we had to take the kids to the doctor or dentist, whatever, they, you know, that, that was all covered. So when I walk– I remember it was just, you know, like, I guess you said like, I won the lottery as far as getting a job. ‘Cause you look, you look nowadays coming down there in ‘69, when you got a job like that, you set your mind, you can work there the rest of your life. Those jobs are gone.*

*You know, they're not around here anymore. You're not gonna find a place now that you can go into today and say, “Look, all I gotta do is come to work, you know, do what they tell me to do. Keep my nose clean, be safe, and I can work here the rest of my life.” You know, so I, I was really thrilled and excited and just, you know, couldn't, couldn't wait to get home to tell, tell my aunt and uncle about my first night at work, you know? (6:05)*

Employee [George Recker](#) moved from Los Angeles to work at the Delaware plant in 1971 after the auto factory in LA had closed. He was around when the plant was producing 70 cars an hour on the line. [Recker](#) provides his opinion on the union as an enthusiastic supporter of it, appreciating the cost of living raises as a result of union bargaining and profit sharing (**Part 2, 25:15**). Here, **Recker** describes his memorable interactions with union activity, first in Los Angeles and then Delaware.

**Recker:** *The shop steward comes around and tells me. He says, “Hey, George,” he says, “There's gonna be a walkout. There's gonna be a walkout tomorrow at 11 o'clock.” I said, “Yeah.” I said, “What do I do?” He said, “You don't do nothing. You stay right here.” He said, “You, you're not in the union yet.”*

*You didn't get in the union for 90 days or something like that. I'm not positive. I said, “Okay.” Well, next day there was a walkout. I didn't go nowhere. And anybody that was a new hire, we didn't, we didn't go anywhere. Anybody that, you know, that was hired within that period of time. And they were on strike for maybe a day or so, and they came back and, well, what they did, he said, “They'll, they'll, they'll, they'll tell you to leave.”*

*So maybe an hour after they left, we're standing there, whatever. And they say, “All right, George, go ahead. Go home. Come back, come back when the strike's over.” And that's– that was that. Now at, at Delaware, I was on a picket line one time. In fact, I was over here by the parts plant. That's where my picket place was.*

*I was there like five o'clock in the morning until– you'd, you'd get a shift. They, they, they'd give you a, a, a ticket and say, “Alright, report here at, from five to eight.” So I was there, like, early in the morning, like, five o'clock to eight o'clock. Three hour shifts or whatever. And, we were on strike, I think for maybe three or four days.*

*Now, we had walkouts. In California, there was very few walkouts. They were all chicken. It was– the union– the union in California was different than the union here. The union in*

California was, like, in name only. It was almost like they were powerless and, and the company ruled with an iron hand in LA. Now, when I came here, different story.

*Different story! The union guys here, buddy. You, you didn't screw with 'em. I mean, they, they, they'd say, "Alright, we're walking out at 10 o'clock. You better be walking out 'cause you stay in that plant, buddy. Your tires might be cut." I mean, they, they, they did that stuff. I mean, and we had, we had a few walkouts.*

*We had a few walkouts. Now I heard in, in the, in the '60s. They'd walk out like that. Shop steward [would] come around and say, "10 o' clock. We're going." Out the door, they'd go. Whatever reasons there were, I don't know. But, yeah, most of the time we had legitimate reasons. I mean, management was getting too huffy (47:30).*

[Joseph Parag](#), who started at the plant in 1965, remembers that management began working with employees much more fluently around the same time that the Japanese car makers became a real threat. [Parag](#) worked at the plant from 1965 to 2008. This change was brought about, at least in part, by the introduction of an initiative called the Modern Operating Agreement (MOA), which was meant to give employees more of a say in their work tasks, as well as chances to learn new skills. [They were given more decision-making power](#) and the concept of the team itself was meant to "enhance the self-worth" of employees, according to the MOA handbook. [Joe Parag](#) believes that competition with Japanese automakers spurred the company to switch management styles. Here he talks about the "mutual respect" that management fostered with employees in the 1980s.

*Parag: Then eventually the, the union and companies figured it would benefit them to work together.*

*And the supervisors got to the point, instead of ordering you to do everything, they would ask your opinion. There was a big change coming over time, but it was a big change. They just didn't walk all over you. They just asked you, uh, mutual respect. A lot of respect came along. (07:24)*

## **PATTERN BARGAINING**

There was a sense of shared sacrifice from the bottom to the top of the company during the bailout but union negotiators wanted specific rules for parity laid out going forward. [The United Auto Workers \(UAW\), founded by Walter Reuther](#), helped introduce profit-sharing and other benefits into the auto industry, transforming the jobs available into full-time, stable jobs that many people wanted. Additionally, the union gave laborers in all industries a new type of negotiating tactic that led to better benefits. In [1988](#), the UAW used the collective strategy of [pattern bargaining](#) to negotiate their contract with Chrysler.

Pattern bargaining is a term for a collective strategy, first implemented in the auto industry, that makes it impossible for one company in an industry to gain the upper hand by paying its

workers more or less than competitors. The goal is to improve conditions across all companies in a long term, sustainable way. In this case, the UAW had already finalized contracts with Ford and GM, the other members of the Big Three. The 1988 contract banned plant closings and also included a new clause, **which made it impossible for executives to receive bonuses when employees did not share in the profits**. At that point, pattern bargaining had not been used in several years in the auto industry. That contract expired in 1990.

In this audio clip, **Bill Mariano** describes some pros and cons to the role that unions can play. Here, **Mariano** describes his work philosophy while giving the listener an understanding of his particular regional background and sensibility.

**Mariano:** *And, but there's a lot of good to the union, too because it does a lot of— make sure people get good working conditions. Good wage for [a] day's work, good health benefits, that kind of stuff [the] union's good for. It's when they step in to tell the company how to run their business is when I think they're wrong and I'll, I'll say that to anybody, but when they go in there and fight for a guy's wage or because the place is unsafe or, or unsanitary or equipment isn't right or isn't safe. I support the unions a hundred percent, but there's a lot of things I don't support that the unions do try to do.*

*But I come from [a] coal mining town where unions was strong and they needed them down there because, uh, the term redneck came out of Blair Mountain, where I'm from down there. Guys that fought the big businesses, they, they had to go to war with them, with guns and the, and the union guys all wore red bandanas. So when you were shooting, you don't shoot anybody with a red bandana. That's where the term redneck came from. If you ever watch the History Channel, they'll tell you that. But I, I understand the importance of unions cause them guys had terrible working conditions in them mines. I got to— being in school now, I got to see the history of it. Then when I went out and my dad was a very strong union man, very strong.*

*In fact, when I went into management, it was hard for my dad. And when I went into management, he called me a traitor. My dad called me a traitor. I had to sit him down and explain to him about, you know, what my idea of being a manager was and, you know, cause he was, when I'd become a vice president, he was proud, but when I'd become a manager, I was a traitor.*

*And to hear my dad say that, it hurt me. But I understood he's, he's, he's thick skin union, you know, but I was his son. Should have been, should've never called me a traitor. We should have, should have discussed it first. And after we discussed it, we had some words about it. He felt I was a man then. I was, I was still his son, but I was more of a man that I explained to him about what good I could do as a manager to help the union. And when he saw my theory about, you know, not just strict, I wasn't strictly a management guy and I wasn't, even when I was union, I wasn't strictly a union guy. I was a corporate— I'm a corporate guy. I work for a company. 'Cause if a company don't succeed, whether you're [in a] union or whether you're in management, nobody succeeds.*

*You better be a company man and try to get everybody on the same page so everybody can succeed.*

In the end, the Newark plant could not escape its fate. By 2005, the plant employed a little over 2,000 workers and, by 2008, just 1,100. In 2007, Chrysler was shutting down its assembly plants, including one of the other K-car plants— Jefferson North, located in Michigan. As vehicle sales decreased, plant workers moved to part-time work hours. [Ultimately, Chrysler moved up the closure of the Delaware plant from the end of 2009 to December 2008.](#) The last workers at the plant had been making sport utility vehicles— SUVs— at a time of extreme financial uncertainty, during the Global Financial Crisis, when the public was concerned about higher gasoline prices. Today, Chrysler is the subsidiary of a corporation that is headquartered in the Netherlands, Stellantis, which also owns Dodge, Jeep and other well-known brand names.

Narrator [Lee Bates](#) describes the atmosphere of the plant in mid-December 2008, two weeks before it closed, in this audio clip:

**Bates:** *My last day...I was in the audit center and the last day of the plant, December the 19th, they, we didn't have too many cars to audit because it was, you know, the final day and there, and wasn't much, too much.*

*We were, we were basically clued cleaning up in, in our area, and the plant manager and the president were walking behind the last car, and I went out on the line to, you know, see the last car coming through and they were shaking hands and, but it was, it was really weird because, you know, once the last car went through, you were done.*

*I mean, you're basically paid for the eight hours, but, like newspapers were left on— even when I went through, back in, I guess. [The] University of Delaware bought it and they were having a auction, and I went through on one of the walkthroughs. But you could— I, I went back into a couple areas that I used to work in and there was papers left on the tables, just like, you know, people were coming in the next day and— but they weren't.*

*I remember. Going through and seeing the president and plant shop or— the president and the plant manager walking behind the last car, you know, shaking hands and telling everybody goodbye. It was tough knowing that, you know, you're, some place you'd been for— I was there for 28 and a half and...yeah.*

*Knowing that you weren't, weren't gonna see them people anymore, or the plant was closing and yeah, it was difficult, but I guess you get through it. (46:20).*

**Looking at the experiences of the auto workers, as opposed to framing the industry history simply in terms of union power and government bailouts, allows for varied juxtapositions of individual and collective power. While remarkable leaders have shaped the auto industry, individuals working collectively have been able to push for change. As**

questions continue to be asked about *work-life balance*, *the gig economy*, *the destabilizing force of AI* and other issues, the Chrysler collection can be a resource for all who choose to listen.



## **ESSAY**

What was so special about the Newark plant? As plant worker and narrator [Joe Parag](#) explains, “We were always known as a quality plant. And if you had problems, Chrysler Newark was going to straighten it out” (32:37). [Parag](#), who retired from the plant in 2005, goes on to say that the Chrysler Newark plant was one of the few plants that always made money for the company, even as far away from Detroit as it was. Narrator [Al Volpe](#) refers to the Newark plant as “versatile,” recalling that, at one point, the plant simultaneously produced a convertible, a four-door vehicle and a second type of larger four door vehicle. Additionally, narrator [Richard McDonough](#) notes that Newark was known for its workforce.

Beyond providing an opportunity for a listener to explore the unique qualities of the Newark plant, this interview collection allows for research questions, such as, *What did meaningful work look like in a factory in this region in the second half of the 20th century?; Are all factory jobs rote and unskilled? (An obvious No); How did various stakeholders in the plant interact with each other in ways that were mutually beneficial?; What types of technological innovations did workers participate in bringing into the greater world? And an overarching question; What is the significance of all this within the greater context?*

In a so-called post-industrial or deindustrialized era, these audio interviews offer the listener a glimpse into a different way of life, with all its presumptions and modalities, as these narrators speak from 2011 to those of us who may contemplate futures even more precarious. Some of the narrators take obvious satisfaction in their work. They believe that working hard leads to stability and are grateful for their experiences, though some narrators have been through layoffs, strikes, and periods of conflict with other employees. On the flip side, workers could get time-and-a-half, double time, and holiday pay. But upward mobility was not always a sure thing; narrator [Al Volpe](#) emphasizes that it took him twenty five years to get the repair job that he wanted. There are easily identifiable success stories: narrator [Richard McDonough](#), who first began work at the plant in 1976 points out that his father, with an eighth grade education, was able to become union president at the plant. “He wanted for me what he had,” [McDonough](#) says, then mentions that he now must work two jobs in addition to his retirement pay, and laments rising prices. He describes the company’s food pantry, for workers in need. There is the sense in his interview of a possible future with fewer amenities and more challenges.

There is the urge, in trying to make meaning and draw conclusions from such primary sources, to summarize events in a chronological order or to choose one narrative and go with it— Chrysler had a great comeback! Or this company has endured through major ups and downs! Or Chrysler had its heyday and is currently a shell of itself. Onward to the new and better future!

But the multiple narrators allow for multiplicities. In choosing this collection, as this project took shape, I found that my interests veered toward examining how the jobs of Chrysler workers matched up to my own ideas about what a “good job” is and I was curious about how employees related to each other as well as those in the most senior leadership positions. It would have been easy to make this a story about increased automation but I decided to try to focus on relationships. The [University of Delaware collection](#) is freely available on [Artstor](#).

Unfortunately, the auto industry has not been careful about preserving its history. When I contacted Stellantis Historical Services in Detroit, MI, for instance, I was told that it is not a research archive, but a corporate archive. The employee there was able to send me several photographs and some public releases about the Newark plant. My understanding is that, although archive collections about autoworkers exist in various places and car museums have vintage cars for the car enthusiasts, there are no “go to” centers or research organizations for researchers who are interested in automotive history.

In the field of oral history, shared authority is a concept that allows the narrator to maintain a hold over the narrative. Journalists may have other aims. They might want to focus on specific answers, steer the interview toward certain topics or promote their own viewpoints. The journalist Doron P. Levin, for instance, is critical of Chrysler and Iacocca throughout his book, begrudgingly admitting the success of the K-car and minivan (Levin, 1995, p. 82-87). Michael Frisch, who originated the concept of shared authority, refers to oral history’s “ability to speak from the bottom up” (Frisch, 1990, p. 10). This collection is definitely a bottom up perspective of Chrysler and the auto industry. Many books about business history focus on executive leaders and business principles for success, instead of the experiences of company employees. In this media age of “experts” and “authorities,” the workers show their expertise quietly, stopping at points to clarify terms and details for their interviewers. Using the lens of oral history allows these workers to express a range of opinions within the same interview, noting the negative aspects of working at the plant— substance abuse among workers, workplace safety concerns,

bad supervisors— while being able to have overall gratitude for their experience. As co-constructors of the interview, these workers sound like they're at ease as they shift from topic to topic. All of them seem like they're happy to just have a conversation that helps a college student complete coursework.

Some of the narrators even have an inkling of how their interview might be used. [George Recker](#), for example, asks his interviewer, Alex Keen, what the interview will be used for and gets a clear answer from him. The interviewer explains: **(Part 1, II, 1:23:05)** *You have your perspective and the next guy has the next perspective and the idea is that a historian will one day look at all these perspectives and do their best to pull an overall idea about it. That's, that's the project.*

[Recker also pontificates about the future, in general, and his curiosity about it.](#) He recalls a conversation about the potential for a specific technological advance— the moon landing— with his grandfather **(Part 1, 0:20)**:

**Recker:** *"You know, I regret that I won't be here fifty years from now...you know, it was funny...just after I got out of high school, and they were sending rockets to the moon...and taking pictures of it...my grandfather who...I guess, was in his seventies at the time... I said..."You know, pretty soon they'll be putting a man on the moon." He said, "George, he says, uh, he says, "I think they'll take pictures of the moon, but I think, don't think they'll ever land a man up there."*

## THE COMMUTE

[Joe Parag](#) notes that many of the employees were willing to endure unpleasant commutes to get to these jobs, because these jobs were considered to be good jobs. After pointing out that he woke up just after 4:00 AM to be ready for his morning shift, [Parag](#) states that, "I was lucky because a lot of guys came from Smyrna, lower Delaware, Maryland, Jersey, PA...A lot of them had to get up two or three o' clock in the morning just to go to work every day" **(28:26)**. The interviewer chimes in, "They built neighborhoods... for these guys." [Parag](#) explains in further detail that some workers would drive from Baltimore for their commute. [An obituary for Chrysler employee Donald Wayne Goodman](#) reads, "He commuted from Philadelphia to Newark for three decades and during this time he established lifelong friendships with his carpool buddies." These jobs were so appealing that workers moved from nearby states.

Narrator [Al Volpe](#), for instance, relocated from Brooklyn, NY. He mentions that in the mid 1970s, as other auto plants around the country shut down, the Newark plant started taking workers from St. Louis, Los Angeles, upstate New York and other places.

While the commute may have been lengthy for some, the stability of the work schedule allowed other employees to pursue hobbies and interests. [George Recker](#) describes his involvement as a Little League coach for children's baseball teams. He also talks about participating in sports teams that were organized in the plant (08:35). [William A. McKay](#) explains how he had enough free time to get through his undergraduate education, by working at the plant each summer and then returning to full-time employment.

### NOT ASKING FOR CHARITY

In order to better understand these oral history interviews, it is helpful to place the workers and the Newark plant within the greater context of the auto industry and the position of Chrysler within the industry. Chrysler, one of the Big Three U.S. automakers, enjoyed success up until it almost went bankrupt at the end of 1979. Then, Chrysler experienced a turnaround that kept the company moving forward with new makes and models until the Great Recession of 2008, when it was bought by the multinational company, Fiat, and then later on, a second multinational company, Stellantis.

The public understanding of Chrysler, and the auto industry, in general, is tied into the obvious fact that this industry has gotten a lot of help from the federal government. In 1979-1980, Chrysler CEO, Lee Iacocca, lobbied for, and received, a gigantic government bailout— \$1.2 billion dollars. In taking help from the federal government, Iacocca knew that he needed to show a certain distaste for the notion of charity. In her thesis, *The Changing Image of the Chrysler Corporation*, **Jane Samra** points out that negative notions about charity harken back to frontier times in the United States, where the rugged individual was held up with admiration for being self-reliant. Iacocca would have gotten a similar message that accepting charity could be seen as a sign of weakness from his Italian lineage, as well. **Richard Gambino**, in *Blood of My Blood*, a book about the experience of the Italian diaspora in the U.S., writes:

*All associations with agencies of the state were shunned. The New York Times on September 29, 1972 published an article entitled "The City's Italian American Needy: Too Proud*

*to Take Aid They ‘Earned’.*” The piece detailed the refusal of impoverished Italian Americans to seek or accept welfare aid or other state aid. The report showed that immigrant, second and third generations continue to regard such assistance as anathema. Even elderly individuals who worked and paid taxes for decades, thus entitling them to aid in the moral view of most Americans, refuse state aid. In the old code which is still very much alive, to be poor is a misfortune, but to be the object of carità is shameful. p. 337.

Carità is the Italian word for charity. In one print ad, titled, *What is Chrysler Asking for: A Handout?*, **Iacocca** tackles this concern that Chrysler may be seen as looking for “free” money or asking for what is sometimes called “corporate welfare.” The ad declares that the loan is not a handout but “temporary assistance for 1979 and 1980 equal to the cost of government regulations for these two years” (p. 150). So, Chrysler needs money from the government in order to keep up with government regulations. Therefore, the company is not a burden to the people; the government, with its arcane systems, is a burden to the company. As Doron Levin, a journalist and author, writes, “Iacocca’s platform consisted of one main plank, that the government had mishandled trade and the economy, precipitating a crisis for Chrysler and other companies (X).” For members of the public who remained unconvinced, another print ad, *Has Chrysler Done Everything It Can to Help Itself?*, seeks to assure them that Chrysler made changes on the business side, restructuring investments, improving efficiency by cutting costs and hiring the best people (p. 150-151).

**Samra** refers to the concept of an “equality of sacrifice” in which workers, management, and the federal government have a shared mission and give things up for the greater good. Before the bailout, this shared sacrifice was obvious. [Al Volpe](#) remembers when Chrysler employees agreed to a wage freeze for two years at the beginning of the 1979-1980 bailout. As time went on, workers and the union became more concerned about ongoing layoffs. Workers went on strike at different plants in 1982 and 1983. As Levin writes, “Trust was fine as an abstract concept but nothing beat a tough contract for ensuring fair terms of employment” (p. 82).

## RHETORICAL POWER

Chrysler did more than promote that the company’s vehicles were fuel efficient; its advertising campaign invited potential customers to participate in the mission of lessening U.S. dependence on foreign oil. One print ad from August 1979 specifically asks, *Is Chrysler building gas-guzzlers?*, to which the answer is *No, of course not* (p. 113). While encouraging the public

to become energy independent, Chrysler, in 1979, was also asking for the biggest corporate rescue package in U.S. history. Yet the people had a heightened awareness of the problems posed by imported oil, with the Iran hostage crisis, a long ordeal in which U.S. diplomats and citizens were held in Iran from late 1979 through early 1981– in the news. The Chrysler Loan Guarantee Bill was passed by Congress in December 1979 (p. 27).

### A COMEBACK

In her thesis, **Samra** explores the ways in which, “Rhetorical analysis, as always, holds the mirror up to societal values” (p. 119). **Samra** explains what she calls, “the mystique of faith,” which Iacocca espoused in the same way that notable Western political and military leaders have at various times. It’s the idea that no matter what happens, the U.S.-- and the people within its borders– can endure and improve. **Samra** points to a 1983 Psychology Today article, where Iacocca is quoted as saying, “Anything we did, we can undo.” **Samra** believes that part of Iacocca’s message to the public could be phrased as, “If we let our country fall apart, we could pull it back together again better than before.” (p. 108). A kind of pervasive, boundless optimism is found in the Chrysler media campaign and it is familiar to the public. In one of the company’s ads, Chrysler promises that, “One million front wheel drive cars for America is only the beginning,” and that the company will become “best in class,” rather than trying to be the company that sells the most vehicles. The company could be seen to be returning to the ambitions of its founder, Walter Chrysler, who– despite the Great Depression– in 1930, financed the construction of the Chrysler Building in New York City, the second largest building at the time (p. 9).

If U.S. consumers had questions at the time, Chrysler wanted to address these questions directly. Some of the commercials of the era start out by posing the question or concern. *Why does Chrysler want to stay in business? Would America be better off without Chrysler? Would America be better off with a Big Two instead of a Big Three?* These are broad questions, more likely to be asked by players within the auto industry and the financial space, rather than by a general audience. Just as with its makes and models of vehicles, the company wanted to reach as many types of people as possible with its responses. In order to respond, the commercials acknowledge the wider impact that Chrysler has had on the country, beyond the goods and services it provides.

The ad, *Would America Be Better Off Without Chrysler?*, references the many employees who work for Chrysler, the “52 American communities” whose local economies rely on Chrysler, and the many companies that do business with Chrysler (p. 146). Chrysler plant worker [Joe Parag](#) makes this point as well when he explains, “We covered a lot of areas and a lot of businesses folded because we left...people do not realize that there was a lot of businesses dependent on us” (29:17). In trying to describe the impact of Chrysler, [Richard McDonough](#) says, “It’s put a roof over my head, clothes on my back and food on my table my entire life (1:04:20).”

The ad *Would America Be Better off with a Big Two Instead of a Big Three?* also frames the question in terms of job loss and social burdens. Without Chrysler as one of the Big Three automakers, what would the company’s workers be doing? The ad states, “People with jobs at Chrysler, or jobs that depend on Chrysler, contribute 11 billion dollars each year in tax revenues to our country. Without those jobs, they would be collecting 2 billion dollars instead in unemployment benefits” (p. 147). As to the quality of these jobs, perhaps the most convincing contribution is from the interviews with [Bill Sickles](#), an employee who worked at the Newark plant from 1966 until 2001. Here, Sickles explains just how good the jobs were, even in the sanitation field, and how the people who held these jobs supported their communities.

**Sickles:** *And then I, I went to sanitation. Worked in sanitation for a couple of few years as a—what? it’s called a janitor, you know, but it’s a high paying job. Janitors over there make \$80, \$90, \$100,000 a year. You know that’s...See, that’s, that’s one of the, the big things that people don’t realize, how well-paying those jobs were, what that community, community of Newark, towns around Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey and all— Pennsylvania— have lost, you know. That, that was a lot of dollars, you know. And, you know, because of Chrysler there, I think, the city of Newark grew three times the size they originally were, you know. And they had all that tax base to, to, to work from. And now they don’t have it anymore (18:45).*

By positioning itself as a job creator and community resource, Chrysler was then able to have the conversation about taking a loan or “bailout” on its terms.

### SATELLITE COMMUNITIES

One notable aspect about the Chrysler collection is that its very existence “throws a wrench,” so to speak, into the public’s general understanding that the auto industry was and still is based

in Michigan. Interviewees in Delaware refer to the perceived remote location of their factory in relation to Chrysler's headquarters in Detroit. They worked with the ever-present concern that the Newark plant would be shut down, because shipping supplies to the plant was expensive. Employee [William A. McKay](#), who began working at Chrysler in 1967, talks in his interview about how far away the East Coast plant was from the well-known corridor of suppliers and manufacturers in the Midwest and remembers a supervisor telling him the plant was in trouble. If Japan and Europe were both very far away and too close for comfort, so was Chrysler management at headquarters.

Employee [George Recker](#), speaking in 2011, describes the different options and outcomes for various employees as the future began to appear bleak for the factory. You'll hear his interviewer participating in the conversation, as well:

**Recker:** *Well, I, I was in Newark from 1971. It was sad. It was sad because I knew I, I was gonna still see some of my friends that I, you know, I became good friends with. I, I, it was, it was sad for the fact that, we knew that, that probably in two years the plant was gonna close.*

*And these jobs wouldn't be available to nobody. We had people in there that, say, had 22 years. Well, you know, this guy is hope—, was hoping he would get the 30 or her, they was hoping they'd get the 30. They'd get a retirement package... They'd get— our, our retirement's pretty good.*

*Even if they're not, you know, even if they're only 50 years old. I mean, you could have started there when you were twenty. You get your 30 years, you, you get retirement. They weren't gonna get that. They were offering them a, a \$120,000 buyout. Maybe your health insurance for six months. That's, that was it.*

*Or you could transfer. Now, where you, where'd you have to transfer to? Well, you could transfer to Detroit. You could transfer to Belvedere, which is near Chicago. I could have went there. I would've had, I'd have been one of the top seniority guys if I went there way back. (Interviewer: Mm-hmm.) You know what it is in Belvedere? Cold.*

*It is, it's 90 miles from Chicago. It was, it used to be out, out, out in the farmer's, farmer's life. (Interviewer: Mm-hmm.) It's cold. I didn't wanna go there and that was it. Well, there was St. Louis. I couldn't go to St. Louis (25:20).*

Recker retired in 2007.

## BUYING AMERICAN



Beyond concerns about jobs and communities, some of the narrators show a sense of pride toward the vehicles that the plant produced. [George Recker](#) states, “My boys buy American cars...they weren’t allowed to have a foreign car. No foreign cars in our house. If you have a foreign car, you can’t put it in my driveway” (Part 3, 22:43). Though **Recker’s** tone is playful, he goes on to praise the quality of the Dodge Dart, Plymouth Acclaim and Dodge Spirit and says, in this interview recorded in 2011, that he is driving a 1989 Acclaim as a way to underline the reliability and durability of that make and model. Narrator [Al Volpe](#) remembers that the union tried to stop employees with foreign cars from parking in the front parking lot at one point. He questions whether the viewpoint that any vehicle that is manufactured in a plant on U.S. soil can be considered American-made is valid, since much of the money made doesn’t stay in the U.S., in his opinion.

But, what, ultimately, was the significance of the Chrysler turnaround? For **Samra**, the company’s actions showed the public that, “the often-distrusted alliance of business, labor and government would, when pushed, work” (p. 118). Both the 1979-1980 and 2008 bailouts were not without their critics. Some people believed that the entire U.S. auto industry had been falling behind for years, offering worse quality vehicles than the competition. Narrator [Richard McDonough](#) appears to acknowledge such criticisms when he says, “We built the best quality vehicle we could with the parts we had,” suggesting that those parts were not as good as they should have been (14:50). Employee [William A. McKay](#), in his interview points out that, at the time of the plant’s closure, the only vehicles being produced were SUVs, “with no small cars to fall back on,” while consumers were concerned about gas prices (44:15). Of the competition, he says, “The Japanese...they’re looking five years down the road. Ten years down the road. American management...they want to know, “What is our next quarter?” (1:34:20).

### TIRED/ RETIRED

At the plant’s closing, some of the people most jolted were the employees who had bought into a system that went out of existence before they could get what they were promised; the rules had changed before the workers could receive their expected remunerations. Narrator [Matthew Peace](#), who left the plant in 2007, points out that he has to figure out his own retirement plan and has gone back to living paycheck to paycheck after going through his buyout package (22:50). Narrator [George Recker](#) explains: “*We had people in there that, they had twenty two years...Well, you know, this guy..was hoping he would get the thirty or her...they’d get a retirement package...they weren’t gonna get that...they were offering them a*

*\$120,000 buyout” (Part 3, 25:19).* At an earlier point, Chrysler had started offering incentives for workers to retire or take early retirement. He goes on to say that those workers who weren’t able to complete their thirty years in order to obtain their pensions had the option of transferring to a plant in a rural area outside of Chicago or St. Louis. Some employees did take that option. [Richard McDonough](#) would tell employees who felt cheated by the plant’s closing, that if they continued to do quality work, *“You walk out of that door the last day, you can hold your head up high and say, ‘It’s not because of me” (15:05).*

Other employees, having gotten in at the right time, were able to enjoy their retirement. One such employee, [Bill Mariano](#), expresses concern about the lack of integrity in the wider workforce, lacking customer service and preponderance of work ethic (34:35). But, speaking from 2011, such views, though understandable, do not take into full account the greater instability of the times. In 2011, [Chrysler had just paid off billions of dollars in loans](#) that the company received during the bailout of 2008 and had done so more than six years ahead of time. Before the 2011 bailout using Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) funds, there had been discussion within the government as to whether Chrysler should be allowed to go bankrupt, while the government provided funds to GM. Ford had decided not to take any government loan.

[Al Volpe](#) mentions the multi-generational aspect of the plant, where grandchildren went to the same workplace as their forebears. [Matthew Peace](#)’s grandfather moved from Kentucky, via North Carolina, to Detroit and then Delaware to work in the Newark plant. [Peace](#)’s family story is also an example of the various migratory patterns of plant workers. Narrator [Richard McDonough](#), whose father had worked at the plant, blames the closure of the plant partially on mismanagement. While the adult children of these narrators can’t continue the tradition of working at the Newark plant, [Volpe](#) and other narrators express their preference for the University of Delaware’s purchase of the plant over other outcomes. [William A. McKay](#) says that he was not sorry to see the plant close; his reasoning being that other companies have had their heyday in the area and since left or closed. [McKay](#) provides perspective on what it was like to move into management ranks after getting a college degree and still decide to join the union later on in his career. He also notes that he was the first in his family to get a bachelor’s degree and, while his daughter has followed in his academic footsteps, his son has not.

As the last Newark plant workers walked out of the factory for the final time, as the federal government debated once again whether to bail out the auto industry, this time during the Global Financial Crisis, the future was uncertain and, with rising unemployment, some became bored, destructive, despairing. [A recent study](#), conducted in communities across the Midwest and South, found that deaths from opioids were around 85 percent higher in counties where auto factories had closed compared to counties with operating auto plants. Within a few years, some government officials would declare the era of fine American automobiles to be over. A former Secretary of the U.S. Treasury, Larry Summers, said during [a 2014 panel](#) about the bailout, *“Breaking brand loyalty in this industry is a good thing because the attributes of the foreign cars are better than the U.S. cars...There’s still that gap in quality, reliability. And this has been the gap that’s been driving down the shares of these cars. And that’s the big problem” (10:05).*

Beyond the world of the Chrysler Newark plant, questions about the quality of American automobiles, the spark of American ingenuity, and the future of labor abound. Along with the decline of the U.S. auto industry, the country is decades removed from organized labor’s first crucial battles. As a reminder of the hard-won victories of the labor movement, unions were not even allowed to organize until 1935, when Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act. The founder of UAW, Walter Reuther, experienced a public beating and two assassination attempts before being killed in a small plane crash in 1970. Currently, the UAW counts 150,000 of its members as employees of the Big Three automakers— Ford, GM, Chrysler, now part of the multinational corporation Stellantis. One major concern is that plants that manufacture electric vehicles (EVs) are, for the most part, not unionized (Press).

Another recent development is that the UAW now has a sizable number of graduate students as members. Approximately 100,000 of the union’s 400,000 members work for universities. For the most part, these are public institutions, such as the University of California, University of Massachusetts and University of Washington. But a few are private universities, including Harvard, NYU and Columbia. In recent years, the UAW has had to deal with corrupt practices among some of its leaders (Meyerson). Additionally, some among the public hold disdain for public sector unions, which may or may not result in clouded views about the UAW presence at public universities. These newer members from the field of academia will influence the union in ways that are not yet clear.

It might be too much of a reach to try to draw conclusions about the state of the auto industry today just from the Chrysler collection. Yet, as questions about adjacent topics such as Universal Basic Income (UBI), AI disruptions of the white collar workforce, and men's declining participation in the workforce loom, this collection can continue to be a resource for all curious people who listen.

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