

## **The strategic use of cooperation and conflict: the cornerstone of labour's success in workplace restructuring**

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Examining the experience of a Canadian Steelworker local in dealing with workplace restructuring, the author argues that labour strategies comprised of both cooperative and conflictual elements can produce successful outcomes for both labour and management. Undertaking cooperative ventures with management allows the union and its members access to decisions formerly the sole prerogative of management. At the same time, engaging in conflict when labour's interests diverge from those of management can improve the outcomes of that cooperative process. The leverage labour gains through conflict can encourage workers to openly contribute their insights and knowledge to the redesign of work knowing that their interests will be protected by their union. It also can force management to consider issues and criteria for decision making that it may otherwise not and that may in the long run produce better outcomes.

### **Introduction**

Much recent empirical work in industrial relations has focused on the strategic choices of management to explain the variation in approaches to solving firms' shop-floor competitiveness problems (Arthur, 1992; Cappelli, 1985; Kochan, Katz and McKersie, 1986). For the most part, research in this stream has tended to view labour as largely reactive, arraying labour's responses to management's actions along a continuum from cooperative to militant (Katz, 1988; Walton, Cutcher-Gershenfeld and McKersie, 1994). Further, in much of this literature, successful outcomes are generally seen to emerge as a result of a relationship of trust between labour and management that enables labour to adopt a cooperative approach in reaction to management's workplace initiatives (Bluestone and Bluestone, 1992; Rubinstein, Bennett and Kochan, 1993). This view of successful outcomes as being largely determined by management strategy and labour's cooperation is, I argue, flawed, both theoretically and empirically.

The purpose of this paper is to develop and substantiate the argument that successful outcomes for management and labour can result from a *labour-driven* strategy comprised of *both* conflictual and cooperative elements. The argument presented here is based on evidence drawn from the Canadian steel industry where a local union, United Steelworker Local 8782, has pursued a strategy comprised of both cooperative and conflictual

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elements with considerable success for itself, its members, and, paradoxically perhaps, for plant management.

I present evidence in this paper of Local 8782's involvement with plant management over the reorganisation of work. The local union's strategic use of cooperation and conflict plays out in this case in two ways. First, the local union undertook to redesign work in the plant's coke ovens and by-products department in what would normally be characterised as a 'cooperative' venture with plant management. However, despite its overall 'cooperative' look, the parties engaged in considerable conflict over what the make-up of the restructured jobs should be. How the local union dealt with and confronted this conflict enabled the parties to reach a settlement in which the new form of work organisation met the needs of both labour and management.

Second, while involved in this seemingly 'cooperative' venture, the local union concomitantly fought a grievance and arbitration war with management over the use of contract maintenance workers in the plant. The conflict not only did not harm the coke ovens restructuring project, but it created the leverage the local union needed to become deeply involved in the reorganisation of the maintenance function within the plant. As the case evidence presented below illustrates, labour significantly increased its leverage through the strategic use of conflict and cooperation. Thus, the issue of trust between labour and management appears to be less important than does the balance of power between the parties. Where labour can exert leverage, outcomes for workers improve as they gain added input to redesign decisions. Further, and perhaps paradoxically, outcomes for management also improve as workers are more apt to provide design insights and to accept changes as legitimate if they, or their representatives, have had a hand in the redesign process, making implementation more likely to succeed.

In developing this argument about the strategic use of cooperation and conflict, I return to the original theoretical insights offered by Dunlop's (1958) systems framework that explicitly recognises the importance of understanding the strategies and actions of both labour and management in explaining workplace outcomes. In addition, I also draw upon recent advances in the negotiations field exploring the power of mixed-motive strategies for achieving parties' objectives (Walton, Cutcher-Gershenfeld and McKersie, 1994).

Section 2 begins by reviewing the theoretical and empirical literature that suggests the importance to stakeholders of labour's ability to formulate and implement a strategy combining conflictual and cooperative elements. Section 3 of the paper describes the research setting, including the nature of the production process, and the sources of data used in this paper. In Section 4, I present the case evidence, showing the strategic use of both cooperation and conflict by Local 8782 and how it increased the local union's power relative to management's as it negotiated with management over workplace restructuring. In Section 4 I also document the performance outcomes for plant management, workers, and the local union. Section 5 seeks to understand the historical and institutional determinants of Local 8782's ability to use strategically cooperation and conflict to further its objectives in the process of workplace restructuring. The paper concludes by exploring the implications of this case for theory and public policy.

### **The strategic use of conflict and cooperation: background and argument**

This paper builds upon the strategic choice framework, the dominant framework for understanding variation in industrial relations outcomes. Although the original proponents of the strategic choice model recognised the importance of the strategic choices of

all three industrial relations actors—management, labour, and government (Kochan, McKersie and Cappelli, 1984; Kochan, Katz and McKersie, 1986)—in practice, non-management actors have been virtually ignored. For reasons that I discuss below, the exclusion of labour as a strategic actor is a serious shortcoming in much of the empirical literature. Moreover, where the strategies of labour have been recognised as important (Bronfenbrenner, 1997; Eaton and Voos, 1989; Walton, Cutcher-Gershenfeld and McKersie, 1994), they are for the most part conceptualised along a single dimension ranging from adversarial to cooperative. In this section, I develop the theoretical underpinnings of an argument that labour strategies possessing both cooperative as well as conflictual elements can produce successful workplace outcomes for the stakeholders involved.

In laying out the strategic choice framework in their seminal contribution to the industrial relations literature, Kochan, Katz and McKersie (1986) argued that:

industrial relations practices and outcomes are shaped by the interactions of environmental forces *along with* the strategic choices and values of American managers, union leaders, workers, and public policy makers. (p. 5, emphasis in original)

Yet, despite this original framing, empirical studies using the strategic choice perspective have virtually ignored non-management actors. The main emphasis in this stream of work has been on linking management's business strategy to its industrial relations strategy and, in turn, attempting to demonstrate their effects on industrial relations outcomes (Arthur, 1992; Cappelli, 1985; Nay, 1991). Such an approach has been highly successful in understanding the formulation of different industrial relations strategies across firms. However, the exclusive focus on management's choice of business and industrial relations strategies has proved to be a relatively poor predictor of eventual industrial relations outcomes. Specifically, the strategic choice framework cannot adequately explain why the pursuit of *identical* managerial strategies sometimes leads to different outcomes across sites (Arthur and Konzelmann Smith, 1994; cf., Birecree, 1993; Katz, 1985); or how different managerial strategies can lead to *similar* outcomes (cf., Cutcher-Gershenfeld, 1988; Ichniowski, 1992).

What is missing from these studies focused almost solely on managerial strategic choices are the strategic choices of other actors and the interactions among them. In particular, given the competitive imperatives of the last decade and a half, in which shop-floor industrial relations have become increasingly important in the creation and sustainability of firm competitive advantage (Kochan and Katz, 1983), the strategies of labour appear to be of central importance. The shop-floor is a critical level of analysis. Not only is firm competitiveness often determined by increases in worker productivity brought about by new forms of work organisation and employee involvement in decision-making, but new work rules, technology, pay systems, and transfer and promotion policies must all be negotiated with labour either formally or informally before they can be successfully implemented (Shire, 1994).

Few studies to date have looked specifically at the shop-floor dynamics of workplace change. In particular, little attention has been paid to the issue of conflict except in most cases to dismiss it as a pathological outcome of poor labour-management relations and a barrier to successful change. In what follows, I highlight the existence of and relationship between two distinct kinds of workplace conflict: the conflict inherent in so-called 'cooperative' initiatives; and the conflict that arises in other areas of the parties' relationship separate from their 'cooperative' undertaking.

The process of workplace restructuring provides an illustrative example. Its overarching purpose is one of cooperation, presenting the parties with an opportunity for joint gains in a 'win-win' situation: plant management has the opportunity to improve plant outcomes such as efficiency, quality, and cost; while labour has an opportunity to reduce onerous levels of supervision, increase job security, broaden restrictively defined Taylorist jobs, increase worker skills and pay, and augment worker decision-making authority on the job (Bluestone and Bluestone, 1992). Despite the overall integrative possibilities presented by workplace restructuring, restructuring remains a highly politicised process in which conflict inevitably arises around the specific choices the parties will make (Crozier, 1964; Thomas, 1991). Is outcome *A* (say, lower cost) more or less important than outcome *B* (say, increased worker decision-making ability)? Similarly, is contracting out work a better way to lower costs than reducing levels of supervision? Verma and Cutcher-Gershenfeld (1993), after studying a number of cases of unions and managements engaged in joint governance initiatives, conclude that:

Under joint governance, the surfacing and resolution of conflict is a necessary condition for effective (and far-reaching) cooperation. In the absence of effective conflict resolution, cooperation will be undercut. (p. 229)

A second type of conflict also exists at the workplace and is separate from the parties' 'cooperative' venture. Yet, how it is dealt with is critically important for the ongoing success of labour-management cooperative initiatives. This kind of conflict is not embedded in a seemingly cooperative undertaking, but rather arises outside the cooperative venture from purely distributive issues, those in which one party gains only at the expense of the other (wage levels or employment levels are typical distributive bargaining issues). How this type of conflict is managed is of significant strategic importance to labour. Keeping the two parts of the relationship with management separate is one alternative. Under this scenario labour continues to work jointly with management on restructuring initiatives at the same time as it attempts to resolve the conflict that has arisen elsewhere. A second alternative is to link the two spheres of the relationship in a reactive way. This would entail labour withdrawing from or holding hostage the 'cooperative' undertaking around restructuring once conflict in another part of the relationship has developed. A third, more proactive, alternative response by labour is actually to bring the conflict to a head as a way of creating the leverage necessary to achieve its broader objectives in the 'cooperative' sphere of the relationship.

It is this third alternative that is indicative of labour's strategic use of conflict. By strategically linking the two spheres of the parties' relationship and using the conflict as a leverage point, several benefits arise. With proactive union representatives, able to surface and resolve conflict, workers are more likely to believe their representatives are strong and capable of influencing managerial decisions. This provides the firm with several benefits. First, where workers recognise that their representatives have not been coopted by the cooperative process—that they are able to represent workers' best interests as distinct from the interests of management—workers are more likely to engage fully in the process of restructuring. Having those closest to the task involved in work redesign, openly sharing their knowledge and insights about the work process—what works, what does not, what will, what will not—clearly benefits the firm and is critical to the eventual success of the restructuring process (US Department of Labor, 1989). Second, engaging in conflict with management that is successfully resolved provides workers with a sense of reciprocal obligation, that management values and takes into account labour's input and that

labour's interests are not to be compromised (Womack, Jones and Roos, 1990). Thus, workers are more likely to accept the implementation of the workplace change, which again benefits the firm.

In addition, labour's ability to conflict with management over workplace issues when necessary provides labour with important leverage. Without significant leverage, labour is not likely to be able to force management to deal with agenda items of importance to labour or to consider criteria for decision-making that are important to workers. Again, better outcomes are more likely to occur if management is forced to address issues on labour's agenda. Although the cooperative process is complicated by the use of conflict, labour and management may, in fact, achieve more potentially comprehensive resolutions through its use (Verma and Cutcher-Gershenfeld, 1993).

In what follows, I present evidence drawn from the experience of one local union engaged with management in workplace restructuring. Able to use both cooperation and conflict strategically, this local union has succeeded in negotiating outcomes that have benefited its members, increased its own role in workplace governance, and solved a number of workplace problems of concern to management.

### **The research site and data sources**

The evidence presented in this paper is drawn from the experience of one Canadian integrated steel-making facility located in southwestern Ontario. Stelco, Inc.'s newest facility, Lake Erie Works, is located in Nanticoke, almost equidistant between Toronto and Detroit amidst the rolling farmland of southwestern Ontario. Opened in 1980, Lake Erie Works is the last integrated steel mill built in North America. It produces 1.8 million tons of steel annually and employs about 1,400 people.

United Steelworker Local 8782 represents the 978 production and maintenance workers at Lake Erie Works. Approximately 90% of the local's membership is drawn from the surrounding farming community. The other 10% was recruited from Hilton Works,<sup>1</sup> Stelco's other integrated steel-making site located 30 miles away in Hamilton. As the smaller of Stelco's two integrated steel-making sites, Lake Erie Works has historically been overshadowed by its larger sister plant, Hilton Works. Similarly, Local 8782 has been overshadowed by Hilton Works' much larger and notoriously militant local union, United Steelworker Local 1005. Until the early 1990s, Local 8782 was simply one more local in the Stelco chain, a local who signed a 'me too' agreement after Local 1005 successfully concluded the Stelco agreement with Hilton Works management.<sup>2</sup> It was only in 1993, in the wake of the break-up of chain bargaining at Stelco, that Local 8782 negotiated its first collective agreement with Lake Erie Works' management.

As an integrated steel-making site, Lake Erie Works produces steel from the basic ingredients of iron ore and coal. Using these inputs, Lake Erie Works bakes coal into coke, combines coke with iron ore in blast furnaces to produce molten iron, converts the iron to molten steel in basic oxygen furnaces, continuously casts the steel, and, then, in its hot strip mill, rolls the continuously cast steel slabs into coils that are sent to Hilton Works for

<sup>1</sup> At the time of Lake Erie Works' opening, the North American steel industry was entering a period of decline. Rather than face almost certain layoff, many low seniority workers from Hilton Works chose to transfer to the new facility.

<sup>2</sup> The Stelco-Local 1005 agreement in fact set the pattern for the entire Canadian steel industry, with considerable spillovers to other parts of the manufacturing sector as well.

finishing. In large part, the work environment is dirty, dangerous, noisy, and physically unpleasant, especially in the stages of production prior to finishing.

Steel-making is largely process technology, meaning that machinery uptime is critical for productivity, cost and quality outcomes. Thus, maintenance plays an important role in plant performance. Traditionally, the workforce has been divided into two basic groups: operators to run the equipment and skilled trades workers to maintain and repair it. To coordinate their efforts and ensure the smooth running of the plant, steel workers have historically been closely supervised. In recent years, with the need to cut costs and to improve performance, the coordination role is being pushed down to the front line. This is accomplished in one of two ways. One is to create maintenance-operator jobs, in which skilled trades workers both operate the equipment as well as maintain and repair it as needed. The other is to retain the two occupational groups, but to give operators a number of minor maintenance skills (such as greasing and oiling, visual inspection, and the ability to assist the skilled trades in their jobs). These changes have been difficult to implement largely because of the resistance from skilled trades workers. Not only do they resent having to take on operating jobs which they regard as boring and beneath them, but they also resent parts of their jobs being taken over by semi-skilled operators. However, as a result of these changes, the degree of supervision has been reduced.

The evidence presented here comes from several sources. I visited Lake Erie Works in March, May, September, and November 1994. On each occasion I met with representatives of plant management and the local union over the course of two days. Sometimes I met with the parties separately, at other times joint meetings were held. A list of my informants and their organisational roles is contained in the Appendix. This paper is based largely on this interview data as well as on documentation with which my informants provided me: copies of collective agreements, committee reports, memoranda of understanding, local union newsletters, Stelco annual reports, formal written job descriptions, and employment records. In addition to the interviews I conducted on site, I have been in contact by telephone with individuals on several occasions to fill in gaps, to ask for more detail on certain subjects, and to request further documentation. Finally, a description of the restructuring process and outcomes (Frost and Verma, 1996) has been read and verified by the parties.

### **The strategic use of cooperation and conflict and impacts on outcomes**

This section presents evidence of the strategic use of cooperation and conflict by Local 8782 during the process of workplace restructuring at Lake Erie Works during 1993 and 1994. I describe how Local 8782 has been able to manage the conflict inherent in the restructuring process itself, as well as to use strategically the conflict that occurred outside of the restructuring arena. In so doing, it has strengthened its role in the plant, improved conditions for workers, and solved competitiveness problems for management. The section concludes with a discussion of the short- and long-term outcomes for labour and management of the local union's strategy.

Conflict that arises in the course of negotiations over workplace restructuring at Lake Erie Works is managed by a set of institutions designed by the local union and plant management and negotiated into the parties' 1993 collective bargaining agreement. Recognising the changing competitive environment and the need continually to improve operations if Lake Erie Works was to remain a low-cost, efficient producer, plant management and the local union negotiated Item 4 into the collective agreement. Item 4

created the Senior Level Committee (SLC), comprised of three members of senior level plant management and three members of the local union executive. The SLC's mandate is jointly to develop solutions for problems in the areas of workplace reorganisation, training, contracting out, technological change, and workforce scheduling. Decisions of the SLC are to be reached 'upon mutual consent'—that is, by consensus (Collective Agreement, 1993). Where the parties disagree and cannot reach consensus, it has been agreed informally that no action will be taken (McClure interview, March 1994; Preston interview, Nov. 1994). Management does not, in effect, have the right to act unilaterally in any of these five areas.<sup>1</sup>

Item 4 also spells out a system of committees to be convened to deal specifically with work reorganisation. Working committees in the areas undergoing restructuring are appointed by the SLC. These working committees are jointly chaired by a management representative (usually the departmental superintendent) and a representative of the local union (usually the area's steward). The co-chairs then appoint bargaining unit members and supervisors to serve on the committee and develop a plan for work reorganisation in the designated area. Through a process of interviewing workers and supervisors in the targeted area, the committee learns about what does and does not work, what changes would be possible, and what changes would not be acceptable. With this information, the working committee drafts its report. The contents must be mutually agreed upon. When completed, the report goes to the SLC for evaluation and subsequent approval. The SLC, too, must reach a consensus decision regarding the plan's merits. If not, the plan will be sent back for redress or be scrapped. Assuming the plan is acceptable to the SLC, the bargaining-unit members who will be affected by the changes must ratify the proposal in a secret ballot. Once again, if those to be affected by the changes do not agree to be bound by them, the plan will die. Management will not unilaterally implement a plan over the wishes of those affected.

This system of forums for employee and union input to the work reorganisation process, coupled with the guarantee that decisions will be made by consensus and that management will not unilaterally make any changes, have forced the parties to confront differences and resolve their conflicts. A specific case, that of work redesign in the coke ovens and by-products department, provides a good example. This example is also useful because a shadow case, that of coke ovens' restructuring at Hilton Works also exists (cf., Frost, 1997); governed by a different set of institutions and process, outcomes varied considerably between the two sites.

In the fall of 1993, Lake Erie Works management learned that its coke ovens were no longer meeting provincial emission standards. To correct the problem, additional labour was required to perform the task of 'luting', applying sealant to the tops of the coke ovens each time they were used. However, because Stelco had initiated a corporate-wide hiring freeze, Lake Erie Works management was forced to find some way to free up the necessary labour internally. It initiated a restructuring project in the coke ovens to do so.

A year earlier, Hilton Works, Stelco's integrated steel-making facility in Hamilton, had reorganised work in its coke ovens. Given the frequent circulation of managers between the two facilities,<sup>2</sup> management at Lake Erie Works was aware of the changes in work

<sup>1</sup> The one exception to this caveat was the area of contracting-out. The item dealing specifically with contracting-out gave management the right to contract-out subject to the union's ability to grieve any action it believed contravened provisions of the agreement. This distinction will be seen below to be an important one.

<sup>2</sup> The current Works Manager at Hilton Works was formally the Works Manager at Lake Erie Works. The current superintendent in the hot strip mill department of Hilton Works was in charge of the hot strip mill introduction and start-up at Lake Erie Works. These are but two high-profile examples. Many others exist.

organisation made at Hilton Works. In addition, prior to restructuring, work had been organised identically at Hilton and Lake Erie Works, so it was natural for management to look to Hilton Works for a readily available model of work organisation.

At Hilton Works, all former coke-oven operating jobs had been combined into one 'super job'. The ostensible goal of this reorganisation was to create added flexibility in the deployment of workers through cross-training of all workers in all jobs. In addition, by understanding all jobs and how each contributed to the making of coke, it was hoped that workers would then be able to suggest productivity-enhancing or cost-reducing ideas. However, in practice, none of this came about. Instead, management failed to make the investment in cross-training necessary to guarantee flexible deployment or an increase in worker understanding of the work process. Rather, by developing one large job description and paying all operators the same wage rate, management gained the ability to assign the most competent worker to each job, regardless of seniority.

Lake Erie Works management believed it could gain the necessary staffing flexibility to add luting to the job description if it could combine all operating jobs into one large job (by having everyone responsible for all aspects of the coke ovens' operation, people would be able to undertake various tasks, including luting, as necessary). The local union, however, vehemently disagreed with plant management on this issue. Interviews with workers in the coke ovens area pointed out two fundamental problems with Hilton Works' 'super job' approach to job redesign. First, the more senior employees who had worked their way to the top of the job ladder were not favourably inclined towards having to perform the less attractive (dirtier, more onerous) jobs at the bottom of the progression. In their minds, they had 'paid their dues' and should not be asked to go back to perform these jobs again. Second, a number of the incumbents at the bottom of the progression simply did not have the basic skills necessary to perform the higher skilled jobs at the top of the progression. Third, although the local union representatives on the SLC were not opposed in principle to this kind of job combination, they were adamant that it had to be implemented properly—with the required investment in cross-training to ensure job rotation, flexible worker deployment, and improved worker understanding of the coke making process. It was only through proper implementation that workers would receive the benefits of the job redesign—added skills, broadened jobs, and increased input (Preston interview, May 1994).

The parties were thus confronted with an impasse: management simply wanted to implement the Hilton Works solution, knowing it could quickly fix its emission problems with little added overhead; while union representatives, having heard workers' concerns and having a different view of what changes in work organisation could potentially mean, were against the implementation of the Hilton Works solution (Preston interview, March 1994). Moreover, because of the language of Item 4, management could not unilaterally implement its solution. The parties had to find a solution to which they could both agree.

The working committee, led by its union representatives, set out to redesign work in ways that met management's need for luting to be done, while at the same time meeting workers' needs for broadened jobs, increased skill, and greater autonomy. By assuming this proactive role, Local 8782 demonstrated its ability to manage the conflict with management. Rather than simply refusing management's suggestion of the Hilton Works solution and bringing the restructuring effort to a close (as it could have done based on the contract language), Local 8782 accepted the conflict of interests as a challenge to find a workable solution. The ultimate redesign of work in the coke ovens was indeed such a solution.



Rather than clustering all operating jobs into one new job, five jobs were created by clustering groups of the former jobs together. These new clustered jobs required the incumbents to learn all component jobs (for example, an incumbent in the new Battery Operator position would be required to learn how to operate the pusher car, larry car, door machine, and quencher car—formerly all single jobs). This ensured that only workers in the same general region on the job ladder were required to perform each others' jobs. In addition, workers were expected to rotate across the jobs now contained in their new job descriptions and rotation schedules were included in the working committee's report on work reorganisation (Mutual Agreement, Oct. 1993). These schedules were designed to ensure adequate time to cross-train as well as opportunities to keep all skills sharp once they were acquired (McClure interview, May 1994). This was to ensure that workers gained an understanding of the coke-making process and thus could provide insights into how to improve it. Finally, as a result of the job clustering, workers in each of the new broadened jobs began to operate as autonomous work groups—establishing their own training and rotation schedules, performing much of their own minor maintenance, and eventually requiring less supervision. As a result of the new form of work organisation, not all supervisors lost due to attrition were replaced (McClure interview, Nov. 1994).

Since mid-1993, restructuring throughout Lake Erie Works has occurred. In addition to the coke ovens' restructuring described above, the parties have engaged in negotiations around restructuring in many areas of the plant including the hot strip mill, blast furnace, basic oxygen furnace, the crane department, and all of plant services (Ellis memo, March 1994). Over 95% of bargaining-unit employees have been affected by one project or another (Ellis memo, March 1994). The type of conflict described in the coke ovens restructuring project commonly arose during other initiatives as well. However, in the fall of 1993, a more fundamental conflict arose between Local 8782 and plant management—one that could have derailed the ongoing restructuring projects and the basically cooperative arrangement the parties had worked out between themselves. Instead, Local 8782 used the occasion to strengthen its role in the plant and increase its involvement in workplace decision-making.

During the summer of 1993, Lake Erie Works management brought in additional skilled trades workers on a contract basis to provide vacation relief. Once the summer was over, however, and vacation relief was no longer needed, these employees remained, as management kept them on contract to meet the demands of a considerable backlog of maintenance work. This was in contrast to past experience in which a number of summer replacements were inevitably hired as full-time employees to replace others lost to attrition or because they were needed as the plant grew. However, due to the hiring freeze imposed by corporate management, no additional hiring was permitted in 1993.

The local union approached management with a request to hire these people as full-time employees, pointing to the need for their skills on a long-term basis. Management refused, citing the corporate ban on hiring. Angered by the company's refusal to hire as permanent members of the workforce the extra craftspeople needed, the union began to grieve the continued use of contractors. Later that fall, Local 8782 again went to management stating that it wanted the contract employees hired on a permanent basis and arguing that management's problem with maintenance was much deeper than it realised. The continued use of contractors, the union contended, was merely a symptom of an inadequately structured maintenance function (Leibovitch interview, May 1994). The union then asked to begin discussions with management on how the entire

maintenance function should be restructured to eradicate the backlog and to ensure that the situation would not happen again (Leibovitch interview, May 1994). The company said it would consider the union's proposal.

With no action from management by mid-December, the union began to grieve every instance of contract employee work. To facilitate this process, computers in the union's offices were set up automatically to print out grievances that could then be sent out for the required signatures (Preston interview, May 1994). In this way, dozens of grievances could be written up within hours. By the end of the year over 400<sup>1</sup> grievances regarding this issue had been filed (Leibovitch interview, May 1994). In addition, the local union began scheduling expedited arbitrations to have the cases heard. The pressure on management intensified over the Christmas period as multiple hearings were scheduled on the same day, ensuring that management would not physically be able to be present at each hearing (Preston interview, May 1994). The local union also took the issue to the local media, charging plant management with union busting (Leibovitch interview, May 1994). In addition, the local union made its campaign an internal issue, devoting a special issue of the union newsletter *Forum* to the conflict. Workers throughout the plant were made aware of the company's continued use of contractors, the insecurity and vulnerability of the contractors themselves, and the underlying inadequacy of the current maintenance operation. Led by their union, Local 8782's members engaged in a work-to-rule campaign, making life miserable for foremen and increasing pressure on plant management (Preston and Leibovitch interview, May 1994).

Although the local union did not ever threaten to withdraw from the restructuring projects taking place in the plant (the coke ovens' reorganisation described above was going on at this time), the union did connect its activities in restructuring to the current conflict. The union continually reminded management of its past performance as a fair and reasonable bargaining partner in workplace restructuring initiatives and thereby encouraged management to reconsider its position and allow the local union to participate in the overhaul of the maintenance department. In February 1994, management backed down under this barrage of pressure. With the help of a mediator, the parties agreed that maintenance at Lake Erie Works was a major problem and agreed jointly to study and eventually restructure the maintenance function at the plant. Begun in late 1994, that project has turned into the most significant joint initiative yet undertaken by the parties.

The restructuring of the coke ovens had a number of immediate impacts on specific outcomes for workers and plant management. The union's strategic management of the conflict over the issue of contracting out has had a number of longer-term implications for outcomes for all parties. Each type of outcome is discussed in turn below.

#### *Immediate outcomes for workers*

Table 1 contains the changes made to work organization in the coke ovens and by-products department as a result of restructuring. Changes were also made in the job classes<sup>2</sup> paid to each of the new jobs and these changes are also contained in Table 1. As can be seen from Table 1, workers, on average, received an additional 3.36 job classes or a \$0.85/hour increase in wages. Some workers did much better than this average, gaining up to \$1.75/hour in wages.

Workers' skills were also enhanced considerably as a result of the redesign of work in this department. Cross-training enabled workers to broaden their skill base. In addition,

<sup>1</sup> As a reference point, a normal year might see the filing of about 300 grievances in total.

<sup>2</sup> An increase of one job class is equal to a wage increase of approximately \$0.25/hour.

Table 1. Job titles and job classes: coke ovens at Lake Erie Works

Before		After	
Job title	Job class	Job title	Job class
Labourer-coke handling	4	Utility Person II	6
Utilityman-battery	3		
Wharfman-cokehandling	4		
Labourer-coke handling	4		
Utilityman-battery	3	Utility Person I	10
Operator-tractor loader	8		
Truck driver	8		
Operator-coal handling	10		
Utilityman-coal handling	9	Coal handling operator	11
Operator-tractor loader	8		
Patcher	10		
Helper, patcherman	8	Patcher	13
Serviceman, doors	9		
Operator-tractor loader	8		
Operator-pusher car	11		
Operator-larry car	11	Battery operator	12
Operator-door machine	8		
Operator-quencher car	7		

Source: Proposal submitted to SLC 1 October 1993 by the working committee on coke ovens job restructuring; internal company-union document; union sources.

the incumbents on the new Utility Person I, Coal Handling Operator, and Battery Operator positions all acquired additional minor maintenance skills. And, finally, with the reduction in supervision levels that occurred in parts of this department, workers gained added autonomy and new levels of responsibility.

At the same time, workers' health and safety were not sacrificed as a result of the leaner manning of this department. Measures of accident frequency and severity remained unchanged after restructuring.

*Immediate outcomes for management*

Lake Erie Works management's primary goal in negotiating the restructuring of the coke ovens department was to free up the labour to do the luting necessary to meet the new provincial emission standards. At the same time, however, management did not want to lower the area's productivity, decrease the quality of the coke being made, or increase the cost of coke-making.

As a result of redesigning and reassigning the coke department's tasks, the people needed to do the necessary luting on the battery tops were freed up. Before restructuring, the coke ovens department was crewed with 74 people plus one welder assigned full time (company supplied data). If work had remained organised as before, crewing would have increased to 80 people to accomplish the necessary luting. By restructuring, the crew remained at 74 with the use of half a welding position. Thus, Lake Erie Works

management increased productivity by 7.5%<sup>1</sup> while once again meeting the province's environmental standards. The man-hours per ton measure (the standard productivity measure in the industry) for the coke ovens department remained unchanged despite the need for the performance of the additional luting tasks.

The quality of the coke being made at Lake Erie Works also improved after the restructuring according to two measures. Coke size showed a 3% improvement, while coke stability improved 4% after the reorganisation of work in this department (company supplied data). As people became familiar with more than just their own operating job, they not only had a better understanding of the coke-making process, but they could also perform their own jobs better. As a result of both changes, quality improved.

#### *Long-term impacts on outcomes*

The conflict over the use of contract maintenance workers led to an eventual settlement in which Local 8782 engaged plant management over the total redesign of the maintenance department (McClure interview, Nov. 1994; Leibovitch interview, Nov. 1994). The local union identified and hired an outside consultant to aid the parties in the redesign.<sup>2</sup> Over the course of more than a year and a half, the project led to a number of significant innovations in how maintenance was done at Lake Erie Works (DeCaria interview, Nov. 1994). In a highly capital-intensive, process industry such as steel, maintenance plays a critical role in firm performance.

In the 1996 contract, the parties enshrined a number of important developments. Management committed to hiring an additional 30 permanent members of the bargaining unit in conjunction with its multi-million dollar investment to expand the current steel-making capacity of the plant. The parties also codified their innovative redesign of skilled trades jobs. The new contract gives joint control over the job descriptions associated with maintenance technicians to representatives of the skilled trades as well as to management. The outcome has been a job paying one of the highest rates for mechanical trades and has produced one of the most productive maintenance workforces in the country (*Canada NewsWire*, 1996), a source of considerable competitive advantage in this process technology industry.

Overall, as a result of its strategic use of conflict and cooperation, Local 8782 has taken on a greater role in the governance of the workplace. The local union continues to be intimately involved in the planning and design of all work reorganization that takes place at Lake Erie Works. Because work redesign cannot proceed without the local union's approval of the proposed changes, Local 8782 has effectively gained consultation rights, if not *de facto* co-determination rights, with respect to all matters of workplace practice. Although this can be perceived as decreasing managerial control in many respects, it provides the changes eventually proposed with a high degree of legitimacy increasing their likelihood of successful implementation. Further, the union's access to workplace decision-making ensures that its members are continually heard in matters regarding workplace change.

The significant degree of worker and union input to plant level decision-making has shown a number of positive impacts on changes in workplace practice. The connection between worker and union involvement and the particular form of work organisation

<sup>1</sup>  $74/80 = 92.5\%$ .  $100\% - 92.5\% = 7.5\%$ .

<sup>2</sup> The individual brought on board by the local union was the former General Manager of National Steel's Great Lakes Division who had risen to his position through the ranks of maintenance management.

eventually agreed upon is fairly easy to trace. The more important linkage to make is to overall plant performance. Although I cannot irrefutably make the connective link between Local 8782's involvement in workplace decision-making and overall productivity and profitability, the evidence indicates that Lake Erie Works is a highly successful operation. Productivity, using the industry standard measure, is in the order of 1.6 man-hours per ton. Comparable integrated facilities have ratings in the range of 2 to 4 man-hours per ton. In addition, Lake Erie Works is by far Stelco's most profitable operation, consistently contributing to Stelco's overall bottom line and paying out the maximum in each quarter to the employee profit-sharing plan (McClure interview, March 1994).

### Explanations for the approach

How is it that Local 8782 has managed to develop the capability strategically to use cooperation and conflict to further its interests and, those of its members, while at the same time meeting the competitive needs of management? This outcome is especially surprising given the frequently documented inability of many local unions in North America to develop a coherent response to managerial initiatives around workplace change and given Local 8782's relatively unassuming history. In this section, I identify a number of critical influences on the development of this particular capability within Local 8782.

One central reason Local 8782 has been able to manage proactively the competing demands of cooperation and conflict has been the ideological outlook of key leaders. Two dimensions are, I believe, especially important. The first is the recognition on the part of union leaders of the distinct interests of labour and management. Despite the rhetoric in many circles about the need for trust and a commonality of interest before labour and management are able to 'cooperate' to increase the competitiveness of operations, leaders of Local 8782 fundamentally dispute this premise. In interviews with the chair of the grievance committee, a key player in restructuring negotiations, I asked specifically about the perceived need for trust between labour and management. This individual replied (with a grin):

Yeah, trust is an integral part of it. They can trust us to be the union and we can trust them to be management. We still have a traditional relationship [with management] and are proud of it. Cooperation from a position of strength is what we're aiming for. (Preston interview, May 1994)

Rather than trust, leaders of Local 8782 have identified power as the critical variable in ensuring the success of so-called 'cooperative' activities (as the latter part of the above quotation indicates). Accordingly, the local union leadership has sought to increase the union's leverage *vis à vis* management with the goal of narrowing the power imbalance inherent in the employment relationship. By doing so, Local 8782 believes it is better equipped to engage in 'cooperative' undertakings without undue fear of being taken advantage of.

The second important dimension influencing Local 8782's ability strategically to use cooperation and conflict is local union leaders' belief that the local union is the vehicle through which workers' interests can best be met. The local union president, a long-time activist in Canada's New Democratic Party and solidly committed to social-democratic principles, is a firm proponent of this view. He is not afraid to articulate problems local union members face in their dealings with management in terms of class interests.

You have to have a vision, a working class vision. You take that vision to the membership by being proactive, to let them know their union leaders are out there doing things for them. You can't be a coward. You need to have the guts to stand up for workers' rights. If you can do this and articulate class interests to workers, they'll come on board. (Leibovitch interview, Nov. 1994)

Local 8782's leaders recognise the fundamental conflict of interest that remains between labour and management, no matter the level of joint activities undertaken and believe that the local union is the best representative of workers' interests in resolving that conflict. Union leaders recognise the conflict between labour and management as a natural phenomenon, one that needs to be managed, not something that is pathological to the relationship that they have with management. Further, they see it as their responsibility, as workers' elected representatives, actively to engage management over such conflicts as they arise. By ignoring or glossing over the underlying conflict, Local 8782 feels that it is not adequately representing its members' best interests. But, at the same time, allowing this inherent conflict to prevent the undertaking of joint projects that can deliver benefits to workers (and their union) is also viewed by Local 8782 as a misrepresentation of members' best interests.

As a result of its leaders' views, Local 8782 has created a number of internal institutions to increase its power and to represent workers more effectively that have aided it in strategically using cooperation and conflict. Most of these institutions have been created for the purpose of 'organizing' Local 8782's members. In contrast to Local 1005 at Stelco's Hilton Works, which was organised in the 1940s after a long and bitter struggle, including a three-month strike, Local 8782 was voluntarily recognised by the company when Lake Erie Works was opened in 1980. Because it lacked Hilton Works' galvanising birth experience and because most of Local 8782's members are drawn from the surrounding farm communities in which Lake Erie Works is located, Local 8782's leaders worried that although the local union had been recognised by the company and duly certified by the Ontario Labour Relations Board, it could potentially remain a local in name only. The leaders recognised the need to build a union from the bottom up: to educate members about the nature of a union, what it could do, and how its members were expected to contribute to its effectiveness and vitality.

Local 8782 has instituted several practices to accomplish this objective. Its network of stewards is an integral part of Local 8782's influence and leverage on the shop floor. Stewards meet regularly with members in their areas to collect and disseminate information (Preston interview, April 1995). Stewards also meet frequently among themselves and with the local union executive to pass along information (Preston interview, April 1995). This network has three main benefits. First, the union leadership has ready two-way communication access to its members, able to keep them abreast of happenings in the plant and dealings with management. This enables the union to educate workers as to the union's vision for reform. Second, Local 8782's leaders can learn of members' concerns and find out what issues are important to them with which the local union ought to be dealing. Therefore, when the local union goes to management it knows it has the backing of the membership behind it in support of the union's position. Finally, an active steward network ensures that Local 8782 has multiple points of pressure that it can apply to management in cases where conflict arises.

In addition to the steward network and its associated communication network, the union has instituted a formal Union Caucus comprised of representatives from operations and the trades as well as from the union executive (Leibovitch interview, May 1994). These people meet weekly or more frequently as needed, to identify trouble spots and to

formulate a union position on what ought to be done (Stables, 1993). This solution is then communicated back to the members as well as to management.

Local 8782 also maintains contact with its members through the local union newsletter, *Forum*. The newsletter not only covers activities of interest to members occurring at the workplace, but also discusses larger issues of interest to working Canadians, such as the negotiation of NAFTA, provincial and federal politics, changes in the workers' compensation programme, and workplace health and safety. Local 1005 at Hilton Works at one time also produced a glossy union newsletter, *Steel Shots*, and mailed it to members' homes. However, prohibitively high costs led to the folding of the newsletter. At Local 8782, however, the problem of cost increases was handled differently. Instead, the union chose to forego colour printing of its newsletter and now local union activists pass out each new issue at the plant gates, giving them a chance to contact members on a regular basis. The newsletter thus provides Local 8782 with yet another opportunity to educate and mobilise its members, maintaining a united front with which to pressure management when needed.

Local 8782's ability proactively to manage both conflict and cooperation is also supported by the Canadian Region of the United Steelworkers. Although the USWA remains an 'international' union in that it represents members on both sides of the Canada-US border, historically, the Canadian region has been granted a large degree of autonomy from its Pittsburgh headquarters. The Toronto-based Canadian National Office in many ways resembles a national union headquarters. The Canadian arm of the union has been very supportive of local unions engaging with management over workplace issues such as the choice and implementation of new technology, workplace restructuring, and worker training. The union's vision for the workplace of the future and the steelworkers' role there was put forward and debated in a 1991 conference entitled 'Empowering Workers in the Global Economy' (USWA, 1991). The strategic route chosen and pursued by Local 8782 flows directly from the vision put forward by the Canadian National Office. The Canadian headquarters also maintains a vibrant research staff and works to encourage knowledge-sharing and communication across locals in its jurisdiction. Local 8782 is active not only in sharing its experiences with others, but also in learning what others have done and with what kinds of results (Preston interview, May 1994; Gerard interview, Feb. 1994).

### **Summary and conclusion**

This paper has shown how one local union has strategically used both cooperation and conflict to achieve successful results, not only for its members and for itself, but also for plant management. The paper has sought to illustrate how Local 8782 has used its cooperative experience with workplace restructuring to encourage management to open up increasing numbers of areas to joint decision-making, while at the same time provoking conflict to create the leverage needed to have management meet the union on its terms. It is this strategic playing-off of both components of its relationship with management that, I have argued, has produced the successful outcomes for all parties.

This research draws on evidence gathered from a single case. Clearly, such evidence can only be regarded as suggestive of the underlying relationships hypothesised to exist between cooperation, conflict, and outcomes for labour and management. However, as a starting point, it provides sufficient evidence to generate hypotheses that can be tested on a much broader sample. In gathering such data to test in a more robust way the findings

hinted at in this paper, industrial relations and negotiations theory can be deepened. In particular, we can begin to move away from simple conceptualisations of labour's strategies and begin to understand the insights gained from recognising mixed-motive approaches to dealing with management. An enrichment of our conceptualisations of labour's strategies will also further our conceptual development of the interactive effects between labour and management strategies.

This work also has obvious implications for policy-makers. The case presented here highlights the gains to be made from the inclusion of worker input to workplace redesign. Although most managers would prefer to be able to make decisions regarding the workplace unilaterally, the research presented here indicates that worker input provides two benefits: it often makes for solutions that are technically better than management might have designed on its own; and it provides the eventual proposal with a degree of legitimacy that a unilaterally designed and implemented system does not have. For both reasons, when such changes are made without the input or approval of those affected, the hoped-for benefits often fail to materialise.

In the case presented here, management was forced to the bargaining table to deal with the maintenance issue by a local union following a carefully orchestrated strategy to gain access to workplace decisions. To do what the parties accomplished at Lake Erie works in fact requires that management relinquish unilateral control. Without seceding a degree of power to labour, management will not gain the expected benefits. Labour needs to be assured that it is not making itself vulnerable to head-count reductions or more onerous levels of work by making suggestions for the reorganisation of work (i.e., that management is not going to take advantage of labour's willingness to share information or make suggestions for workplace improvements). Further, management must be prepared to accept workers' decisions regarding their acceptance or rejection of the proposed plans. A ratification process which accepts only affirmation of the proposed changes is unlikely to provide any form of legitimacy to the changes.

The above, however, may not be possible without changes in the North American policy environment. Given the focus of policy-makers on making American workplaces more competitive and the findings of this research, the policy community ought to look towards increasing the role played by labour in workplace-based decisions. Most American workers enjoy no form of representation, which means that most workers have no institutional power to engage their employers in negotiations surrounding workplace change or restructuring (some highly skilled groups of non-union workers may be an exception). These workers must simply acquiesce in the changes unilaterally designed and implemented by management. The best form of resistance open to them instead may be not to engage fully in the behaviours expected of them—for example, not actively engage in the necessary training, not provide meaningful quality or productivity improving suggestions, not learn and rotate through other jobs.

Yet research and evidence from other national contexts (such as Germany, cf., Thelen, 1987; Turner, 1991; Wever, 1994) seems to indicate that outcomes for all parties, including management, are better when workers actively engage in the process of work redesign. However, workers are less likely to do so where they have no guarantee that their interests will be taken into account in this process or that they have leverage to force management to forego certain things it would otherwise want to do. An institutional innovation guaranteeing workers' right to be heard on matters pertaining to the workplace could provide American workplaces with this advantage. In short, the policy agenda that should emerge on the basis of the findings of this research should be searching for ways of



increasing worker input to workplace decision-making. By doing so, American competitiveness would increase, worker welfare would improve, and workers would experience greater levels of democracy at the workplace.

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**Appendix:** *List of interviews*

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Lake Erie Works

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C. DeCaria	Maintenance Restructuring Consultant
R. D. Ellis	Communications Coordinator
W. Ferguson	Vice President–USWA Local 8782
L. Gerard	Director–Canadian National Office
P. Leibovitch	President–USWA Local 8782
I. B. Macaulay	Staff Specialist Personnel and Industrial Relations
R. McClure	Superintendent Personnel and Industrial Relations
R. Preston	Chair of Grievance Committee–USWA Local 8782
B. Wiebe	Union Facilitator–USWA Local 8782

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