The Crumbling of Consent: The Breakdown of Factory Regimes and the Militant Bronx Cookie Strike of 2008-2009

The time for ignorance (ignorants) is finished!
-Dan Myers, Sole Rosso production manager (Spring 2008)

For us, Amir [a mechanic] was the brains of the machines.
-Jessenia, Sole Rosso table packer

Strikes have become so rare in the US, they have come to be seen as anomalous. In the past, the 'exceptional' feature of US industry that social scientists and activists confronted was the absence of labor strife. Today, labor passivity, most emblematically illustrated by the self-defeating givebacks of the erstwhile formidable UAW, has become so commonplace that it is the accepted norm. When workers do engage in collective militant action at the work site, when they strike for instance, it is an extraordinary event. Today, strikes are the anomalies that need explaining.

The classical Marxist formulation whereby class structure translated into a militant proletarian class formation—with its attendant organizational and ideological components—has failed to materialize in the US, especially in the post-war period. The unfulfilled expectations of Marx's 'class struggle' thesis have been explained by an ideologically diverse array of analysts who point to an even wider range of factors that have inhibited his revolutionary predictions. Marxist scholars in particular have persuasively addressed this divergent outcome from many angles (Burawoy 1979, Moody 1997, Brenner 2008, Archer 2008). Every now and then, however, the disappointing American proletariat still rebels. Despite the theoretical claims to the contrary and despite the overwhelming evidence of labor's acquiescence over the past forty years, American workers still mobilize against their employers. One example is offered by the Sole Rosso workers in the Bronx who struck for almost a year amid unquestionably inauspicious circumstances.

A Puzzle: the Anomalous Sole Rosso strike of 2008-2009

The Sole Rosso strike began in August of 2008. That month, 140 workers represented by Local 80 of the Bakers, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Millers (BCTM) International responded to the startling exactions included in management's contract offer and its unwillingness to negotiate these terms by walking out. They struck against Icewater partners, a private equity firm that purchased the factory – formerly a family-run institution in the Bronx—from Kraft in 2006. The strike, which lasted 11 months, was 'settled' when the NLRB ruled wholeheartedly in the workers' favor, ordering the company to restore the workers' jobs under the old contract and to resume negotiations with the local in good faith.[1] By going and remaining on strike against all odds, the workers displayed an unexpected level of militant action given the present political and economic climate and, more importantly, their particular circumstances in the factory.

On the one hand, these workers may be considered as members of the 'labor aristocracy'. The relatively high wages and generous benefits, even for the less-skilled among them, would lead many to predict a high degree of conservatism resulting from an alignment with the interests of their employers. This view would also predict a consequent inability on the part of the workers to respond to an attack from management with effective collective action. On the other hand, a high percentage of the workers are immigrant women, an important share of whom are single heads of households. The high costs of mobilization they face combined with the plant's segmented workforce, where a minority composed of skilled male workers has historically been better remunerated and would not have been as adversely affected by the new contract offer, seemingly militated against collective action. In addition, after ushering its members into the strike, the Local leadership responded sluggishly to the ensuing deadlock. The local's lack of strategic direction foretold an early unraveling of the strike. Finally, workers were unable to wield their economic might—management was legally and immediately able to hire

[1] Shortly thereafter, the owners decided to sell the brand, inventory and some machinery to a multinational snack company, which relocated to production out of state, and permanently shutter the factory.

replacement workers for the duration of the strike, thus cancelling out the workers' primary leverage. In short, the circumstances of the dispute all pointed to both a significantly impaired ability to strike and a diminished capacity to sustain a walkout. Few if any labor activists and analysts would have predicted the response of the workers, not one of whom crossed the picket line.

Yet the workers struck and cohesively maintained a militant strike even in these adverse conditions. During the strike, they displayed two consistent features: a sense of unity and shared interests and a sense of competence and entitlement. The workers insistently linked their strike resolve and militant class discipline to views of themselves as an extremely competent yet affronted unit of workers who built up the Sole brand by mastering the production of high quality cookies destined for niche markets. These features are puzzling on two counts. Firstly, the production process that undergirded their unified stance was sharply segmented: as indicated above, on one side were highly skilled and overwhelmingly male maintenance workers from earlier migratory waves, while on the other was a majority of mostly unskilled and more recently arrived female immigrant workers, mostly concentrated in the packing department. It is surprising that such a starkly divided work process and workforce would sustain a common identification of interests. Volumes have been written detailing the divisive impact of skill, national, gender and migratory status differences on the class formation of workers and their capacity for collective action. Secondly, their shared sense of competence and legitimacy was linked to identification with the factory. The pride and loyalty to the product/brand they exhibited commonly reflects an alignment with management and tends to be associated with conservatism and quiescence. Instead, at Sole Rosso employees contrasted their dutiful aptitude on the shop floor with the unworthy status of the current ownership. Rather than producing conservative and passive attitudes, the loyalty and aptitudes developed by the workers at the site of production translated into a sense of class power.[2] The workers were committed to an old production scheme; yet they simultaneously made demands

[2] At rallies during the strike, the workers would routinely denounce capitalism and uphold their value as loyal workers all in the same breath.

against an exploitative labor system. The connections between circumstances and attitudes typically associated with business unionism, passive consent, fragmentation and impotence, and/or general conservatism and the class militancy that the workers displayed during the strike are a puzzle to be explained.[3]

This paper attempts to explain the basis of the Sole Rosso workers' capacity to strike and to extend the walkout over eleven months. It explores the links between the militancy and unity displayed during the strike and the changes workers had experienced inside the plant in the years and months preceding the strike. Following observations made as a supporter during the strike, I conducted twenty interviews designed to grasp the extent of management measures to restructure production on the shop floor and to examine the impact of these changes on the consent that had reigned among workers for decades.[4] In the paper, I argue that worker consent began to breakdown as management introduced new technology in a campaign to gain full control of the plant and optimally, from its perspective, manipulate production costs. These attempts tested and reshaped alignments on the shop floor and with management and in so doing eroded the bases for management hegemony. These experiences kindled oppositional exchanges with management by reordering forces and presenting workers with opportunities to exert significant leverage. The resulting shift in shop floor balance of forces laid the foundation for a united and militant class response to management's contract demands. In particular, I argue that the militancy of the workers 1) stemmed from the leverage they began to exert as alliances shifted in response to management's technological offensive and 2) was reinforced across the shop floor hierarchy by the institutionalized relations among workers shaped by production requirements, the

[3] A note is in order on what is meant by 'militancy'. In this paper, militant does not imply a highly charged mobilization. What is meant here are 1) high levels of unity and 2) reliance on direct action rather than exclusively on legal tactics.

[4] Methodologically, this tack presents a number of concerns. The most significant problem is the possibility that the experience of the strike itself in many ways shaped the retrospective perceptions of the workers' shop floor experiences.

collective bargaining agreement, and a pre-existing culture of solidarity in the factory, all elements of established hegemonic arrangements on the shop floor.

BRINGING THE FACTORY BACK IN

Most of the current research on labor struggles has focused on new forms of organizing and mobilizing labor. In particular, there has been a growing interest in campaigns that shift the setting and axis of organizing outside of the worksite and/or away from issues of production. Research on worker centers and community-labor alliances examine new forces to organize, service and informal workers, and poor communities, respectively. Work on the former highlights the ability of informal, low-wage workers with limited industrial clout to form extra-worksite unions that aim to impact public policy (Fine 2005). Scholars focusing on workers' centers begin with the premise that such workers and their organizations have a restricted ability to build direct economic power, whether at the level of the firm or the labor market. They also point to features that set these workers apart from craft and industrial unionism: whereas the latter combined workers on the basis of common skills or industries, worker centers are founded on cultural affiliations, geographic demarcations of community, and direct action campaigns targeting policy makers (Fine 2005: 160).

Researchers and activists interested in community-labor alliances and social movement unionism point to 'relational power' mobilized by workers who are otherwise politically marginal. Under these models, workers leverage power outside of the factory. Proponents of social movement unionism offer a harsh critique of the narrow sectionalism of traditional institutions and US labor politics and propose that unions adopt a 'class struggle' approach that transcends the confines of the workplace (Fletcher and Gapasin 2008). Similarly, Clawson argues that a resurgence of labor will be tied to effective alliances with community struggles. While he is equally critical of business unionism, Clawson has not abandoned the centrality of production sites. Still, in his view, a revival of labor will depend heavily on the momentum generated by movements arising from community organizing (Clawson 2003).

Others labor scholars have focused on external political resources mobilized to advance worker interests in another sense. In addition to the wave of research around worker centers and community labor coalitions, recent scholarship has focused on the efforts of unions to inject militancy into organizing campaigns by *importing* personnel, organizational resources and a culture of militancy. Lopez's *Reorganizing the Rust Belt* describes how SEIU organizers transformed labor organizing in Pittsburgh's 'post-industrial' service sector through the adoption of 'movement-style tactics' (Lopez 2004). Though he locates himself within the social-movement unionism model, unlike Fletcher and Clawson he focuses on the creation of 'new collective solidarities' via the adoption of novel tactics that directly confront the power of employers. He thus situates his research in the context of firms and union locals. However, rather than understanding collective worker action as emanating from structural factors endogenous to the work experience, he privileges the tactical and strategic interventions of external 'self-conscious actors', the tireless union organizers sent in by the local (Lopez 2004: 15). In sum, most of the current work on labor, even research that pays attention to organizing at the workplace, shares a focus on organizational and mobilizational politics that originate from outside the site of production.

This emphasis on the political side of labor organizing seems amply justified. After all, with union density reaching a low of 13%, unemployment at historic levels, and management's irrevocable right to hire permanent replacement employees, predicating labor power on the capacity to flex its economic muscle by disrupting production seems incongruous. Workers' ability to aggregate and shape the labor market across industries has been as undermined as the efficacy of the threat to withhold their labor power from the firm. In short, exercising economic leverage, whether in the labor market or at the firm, hardly seems a viable option in most industries. Yet the fact that the economic basis for worker militancy has been extremely eroded need not lead scholars to neglect worker-management dynamics at the site of production. The strategic and methodological predisposition to look exclusively to politics beyond the gates of the work site ignores an important arena for conflict and class formation; in short,

the declining economic strength of labor need not lead scholars to overlook the politics of production inside the workplace. Just as politics can impact worker militancy from the outside, on occasion collective action is shaped by clashes linked to production inside the workplace. Though few and far between, instances of labor militancy can often be linked to conflict with management around the organization of production and the resulting changes in the balance of forces on the shop floor. How do we explain these anomalous cases? What are the mechanisms linking these fights and resulting repositioning between workers and management to militant actions such as strikes?

This paper starts from two premises. Firstly, formerly quiescent workers must undergo a transformative experience in order to move from consent to contestation. Often, as the Sole Rosso case demonstrates, this transformation is based on responses to changes to the production process, frequently involving technological change, that realign workers in opposition to management. Secondly, workers engage in collective action when they find or develop the capacity to convert their resistance into collective class action. In this sense, they go beyond recognition of interests in opposition to management and actually succeed in acting on this opposition. If these assumptions are correct, then for analytical purposes the emergence of worker militancy can be said to follow two steps. In the first instance, workers undergo a process whereby their shop floor experience reshapes their perception of interests in relation to management. This is a necessary yet insufficient condition for collective action. In order for workers to mount militant action against their employers, they must subsequently overcome organizational and tactical obstacles that pertain to resource and coordination requirements. This paper is primarily about the first instance in the breakdown of worker consent: the realignment in opposition to management. Though this paper is ultimately concerned with the ability of workers to engage in a militant strike, it explores the shop floor conditions necessary for realignment against management. In this sense, it is a paper about class formation and the collapse of hegemonic factory regimes. Finally, while it addresses questions concerning machinery and automation, it is not a paper on the social determinants of

technological change in production. It does, however, address an important question over which labor scholars have disagreed. It contributes to an understanding of worker responses to technological innovation; in particular, it sheds light on the circumstances under which workers are able to go beyond individual disaffection and act collectively in response the introduction of new technologies on the shop floor.

Factory Regimes and the Politics of Production

In a now forgotten debate, Michael Burawoy and Adam Prezworski disagreed over the causal dynamics of working class formation (Burawoy 1995a, 1995b; Prezworski 1995). While Prezworski viewed working class politics and eventual stable class compromises as products of macro-structural actors operating through the institutional framework of liberal democracies, Burawoy countered that such an approach lacked micro-foundations. For Prezworski worker consent is achieved in advanced capitalist societies when labor's material interests are satisfied through the very realization of the accumulation process. A non-zero sum arrangement is constructed which successfully coordinates the interests of capital and labor and which is renewed and re-legitimated through democratic electoral competition. These institutionalized interactions of classes and their representatives are sufficient to explain the passive stance of working classes in advanced capitalist societies.

Burawoy criticized this account of class formation for lacking any relationship to actual production. It was a view of class formation in which class structure was absent, or, more accurately, in which the institutional dynamics of class formation themselves molded a non-antagonistic class structure. His turn to examine class structure did not, however, follow the 'macro-analytic' approach of Erik Wright. For Burawoy, the basic mechanics of class structure as well as the key to working class formation are found in the firm-level production regime. It is here that potential struggle is bottled up as relations of capital and labor are re-shaped *within the enterprise.* He argues that workers' consent is forged through their direct experience with the organization of production on the shop floor. Workers are incorporated into

factory regimes that suppress conflict with management. '[B]y obscuring exploitation', the production process 'obstructs the development of a radical class consciousness' (Burawoy 1995a: 162). The politics around the organization of production is a crucial determinant of working class formation.

Paradoxically, then, exploitation, according to Burawoy, does not produce class conflict. Other scholars have presumed that labor regimes at the factory level intrinsically place workers in conflict with management. The impact of management on workers was dealt with in Clawson's early work. In *Bureaucracy and the Labor Process*, he establishes a simple though profound distinction related to management's supervision. He divides the supervisory function of industrial bureaucracy into two components (Clawson 1980). Bureaucratic supervision at the firm can serve to coordinate production. When fulfilling this purpose, it leads to technical improvements in the production of goods as use values. Simultaneously, however, management supervises production to enforce discipline in the creation of exchange values and extraction of surplus value. Management In this sense disciplines labor to intensify exploitation for increased profits while also subjugating labor for capitalist control of production. Management thus establishes volatile production regimes that necessarily generate conflict.

In *Manufacturing Consent*, Burawoy set out to explain why this exploitative regime in advanced capitalist countries fails to activate the militancy of workers (Burawoy 1979). After all, if workers directly experience oppressive disciplining at the hands of management, they should be provoked into resistance, even if their resistance remains confined to the factory. In his in depth ethnographic study, Burawoy argues that worker quiescence is produced and class formation precluded when the interests of both individual workers and management are successfully coordinated *on the shop floor.* Management, according to Burawoy, refrains from directly disciplining employees as atomized workers are drawn into shop floor practices and even constitute shop floor institutions that promote self-regulation and control.

These shop floor apparatuses, which together make up the hegemonic factory regime, efface the antagonism that, according to Clawson, is inherent in bureaucratic management regimes. Whereas Clawson assumes that workers directly experience the disciplinary function of management, that is, the role of managers in extracting surplus, Burawoy argues that management organizes production such that workers are granted a level of immediate autonomy whereby they participate in and even intensify their exploitation. Thus, the securing of surplus value is obscured (Burawoy 1979: 81)

Burawoy focuses on the labor process as its organization spawns 'games' played by direct producers as well as lower management and auxiliary positions. More accurately, 'the labor process is organized into a game, and the goals that the game defines constitute the values current on the shop floor' (84). The rules of the game generate consent when otherwise antagonistic agents in the work process have an interest in playing by these rules. As he explains, '[a]ny game that provides distinctive rewards to the players establishes a common interest among the players—whether these are representatives of capital or labor—*in providing for the conditions of its reproduction*' (85, emphasis added). In sum, according to Burawoy, consent rather than open antagonism obtains as the labor process itself generates institutions which both workers and management have an interest in following and renewing. Through the games that constitute the shop regime, workers experience a degree of immediate autonomy on the shop floor, escape the direct disciplinary hand of management and direct any conflict or friction they encounter toward other workers. Employers have realized the best of both worlds as it were: they avoid the costly disciplinary apparatuses while workers regulate and exploit themselves; in the process the basis for class formation disappears.

Yet how permanent are hegemonic regimes in advanced capitalist factories and how enduring the consent they generate? When exogenous conditions increasingly militate against class conflict, is it reasonable to expect that internal workplace institutions, especially subject to management encroachments, might become the very institutions upon which worker opposition and collective action

are based? Might there be instances in the early 21st century American capitalism in which contests around the organization and control of production, dissolve conflict-erasing 'games' and in which management actions reveal rather than obscure the appropriation of surplus, thus providing a basis for the formation of class consciousness and action?

Rules of the Game, Technology and Factory Regime Balance of Forces

In fact, factory regimes are never static. By definition, factory regimes are the aggregate result of capital's compulsion to shape the production process and subdue labor in the process. There can be periods, at times prolonged, of regime stability in the work site, but competitive pressures eventually lead management to turn the vices of control in order to further dominate labor. Under such circumstances changes in the organization of production undermine current shop floor institutions, placing consensual game rules under increasing strain.

Braverman's groundbreaking work showed that innovations in management involve an increasing separation between the conception and execution of production—deskilling—allowing capital to dominate production most effectively (Braverman 1974). He presents a coherent drive for the degradation of work and the hastening of capitalist control of production. Marglin's pioneering article, 'What Do Bosses Do?' (Marglin 1974) argued that changes in the organization of production responded not to the technical exigencies of more efficient production but to the need to completely dominate the work process, or to carry out what Marx called the *real subsumption of labor*. Such management innovations open the way for labor to be employed as one more interchangeable input.[5] Thus Marglin concludes that production was restructured into factories not because of the technological superiority of large scale machinery, but because factories allowed employers to supervise and discipline workers as the former moved to take decisive control over production. Both authors agree that the compulsion for

[5] Interestingly, Marglin sees new technologies as class neutral; indeed, providing examples of new inventions that were discarded and never adopted for this reason, he argues that capital will eschew such innovations if they block or even fail to enhance the dominative effects of restructured production.

profits generates a systematic drive for control of all elements of the production process which is both cause and effect of managerial mechanisms for deskilling and discipline. The result is the successful breaking up of self-contained units of production into atomized parts and the inexorable establishment of bureaucratic supremacy over production.

Clawson is sympathetic to these arguments. However, he considers them incomplete. As many have pointed out since its appearance, in Braverman's work, the agency of workers goes unnoticed. Clawson argues that in reality, management innovations run up against tough resistance by workers and at times have *unintended consequences* possibly undermining management's ability to dominate production. Management introduces changes to the production regime in order to alter the balance of forces on the shop floor in their favor. Not infrequently, such changes actually enhance the position of workers producing an effect opposite to what management desired. Ultimately, Clawson describes a dynamic process of internal class struggle in which management unleashes attacks with uncertain outcomes on the existing balance of power in the factory '*through* details of the work process' (Clawson 1980: 51)

In this fight over domincance at the site of production, new technologies are critical. If Marglin was correct to point out that the establishment of new institutions of production follow more of a political rather than economic logic and that restructuring does not exclusively or even primarily respond to the rationalizing imperative ushered in by capitalist competition, he underestimates, according to Clawson, the class value of technological innovation. In the class struggle whereby capitalists seek to impose social control of production, 'technological innovations were crucial *capitalist weapons to help change the balance of power'* (Clawson 1980: 51, emphasis added).

As noted above, when faced with these changes, workers often resist, their experience in this row being crucial in determining their attitudes as class actors on the shop floor. Introduction of technology designed to enhance employers' social control of the factory potentially *reveals the class basis of the*

production regime, where the appropriation of surplus may have once been obscured. When workers effectively engage in this struggle and *are able to put up a sustained fight*, their awareness of the class nature of the struggle for control is increased. Their capacity to act collectively as a class is heightened or at least made more likely when their particular circumstances afford them leverage that leads to successes, even if incomplete, in these battles. Technological innovation therefore exercises a direct influence on the stability of production regimes, testing the adherence to the game rules upon which the shop floor hegemonic order is erected. Contestation around technological change thus becomes eminently relevant for worker consciousness and resistance (Clawson 1980: 54). If technological innovation erodes the conditions for the reproduction of shop floor games, the hegemonic regime is susceptible to breakdown as workers shed their former commitments and begin to view their interests in opposition to management. **Significantly, the contestation that workers experience is rooted in the very shop floor institutions that previously generated stability and consent. In this sense, when workers effectively mount counter-campaigns of resistance, whether formal or informal, their collective commitment to formerly hegemonic arrangements may ironically help generate new antagonistic alignments, shifting the existing shop-floor balance of power and underscoring their new found class allegiances. The very bases of shop floor consent can suddenly become the bases for opposition to erstwhile friends in management.**

Just as Marx may have overstated his 'class struggle' thesis and been too optimistic about revolutionary class formation under advanced capitalism, Burawoy has certainly bent the stick too far in the other direction. To the extent that the foundations of class formation are found at the site of production, it is difficult to maintain that advanced capitalist labor regimes generate consent as a rule. The games that integrate workers as collaborative individuals sharing interests with managers, rather than as an antagonistic class locked in an overt battle over control of the regime can hardly be said to be stable, much less permanent. These regimes must first be constructed. Further, the very nature of competition

compels employers to gain ascendency via the introduction of new technologies. Burawoy himself acknowledged the destabilizing impact that new machinery can have on shop floor institutions and games. Yet he insufficiently explores this impact. Moreover, in a passage reflecting Marglin's neutral appreciation of technology, he maintains that in order to best understand the changes in the labor process, it is best to keep technology's impact constant. He goes on to state that, in any event, 'machine-tool technology… has remained relatively constant over the past century', adding that the most sophisticated technologies are difficultly integrated, its installation causing 'considerable downtime'. Finally, he argues that whatever technological change has been successfully implemented, tends to reinforce the shop floor practices that obscure exploitation and generate consent (47-48).[6]

In reality, new technologies, serving as the battering rams with which employers aim to affect a favorable shift in the shop floor balance of forces, often constitute a shock to the factory regime. While these usually upset the institutions in the plant, they do not necessarily produce realignments and employee opposition. The outcome in terms of class formation will depend on the nature of the unintended consequences of new technologies. Firstly, it depends on the leverage that former hegemonic institutions afford employees. Secondly, it depends on the immediate and unpredictable results of the exercise of such leverage. Finally, realignments are facilitated by shop floor coordination between areas of production that reconstitute cohesive units of production and by formal as well as informal institutions of solidarity are not necessarily engendered by prior hegemonic arrangements.

The paper examines the relationship between the battles over the production process at Sole Rosso, particularly those involving the introduction of new technologies, and the militant class attitudes of the workers who sustained a year-long strike. It argues that battles for shop-floor knowledge, which had

[6] In *Radiant Past*, Burawoy also discusses the introduction of modern steel producing machinery. He remarks that the 80 ton basic oxygen converter which replaced the open-hearth furnaces at the Lenin Steel Works produced a contradictory effect on the balance between despotic and hegemonic factory regimes. It surely led to deskilling and tended to undermine the self-management reluctantly conceded to workers. Its impact on the negative class formation among workers, however, is, on the whole, unclear (Burawoy and Lukacs 1992).

effectively been conceded to mechanics, and contested efforts to automate packing, activated worker resistance. As consent broke down, a new balance of forces emerged which realigned the workers in active opposition to management. The paper accepts Burawoy's contention that the production regime on the shop floor is critical in determining class formation, including consciousness and capacities for collective action, yet sets out to explore the impact of technological innovation on the fight over the balance of forces in the labor process, a feature left underdeveloped in Burawoy's work. If hegemonic production regimes in advanced capitalism tend to engender consent by constituting workers as individuals whose interests are coordinated with those of managers and capitalists yet at the same time are subject to change due to competitive pressures, it is worth asking what features of these dynamic production regimes might undermine integrative games and alter their existing balance of forces. If it is true that we need to look no further than the political and ideological institutions of the workplace to find why workers in the US do not constitute a revolutionary class, it is equally true that we can expect shocks to these institutions to generate flare-ups that might alter the hegemonic order at the worksite.

Through ethnographic observations during the strike and as a participant in strike solidarity work, and based on twenty follow up interviews, it was possible to gain an understanding of workers' appreciation of the Sole factory regime and their self-perception as members of the plant's regime. The interviews conducted with workers, managers and union officials who played a direct role in the shop floor struggles allowed the author to link these perceptions more systematically to the battles that raged prior to the strike as new management's actions impacted the existing regime. After presenting the argument linking struggles patterned by former institutions of consent to the Sole workers' capacity for militant action, in which the contract dispute *triggered* the workers' recently acquired predisposition to class militancy, the paper will attempt to make claims about the generalizability of its findings. In particular, it will address whether the Sole Rosso episode is the result of contingent and exceptional circumstances, suggesting that Burawoy's model of hegemonic capitalist production regimes is still the

order of the day, or whether the developments of Sole Rosso are of a more general character and portend a potential breakdown in the passivity of US workers.

A Brief History and Description of Sole Rosso: Regime Stability and Regime Breakdown

Sole Rosso was founded in 1937 by an immigrant family who ran it as a 'mom and pop' neighborhood bakery for decades. Importantly, labor relations were characterized by a degree of paternalism whereby the owner-managers acquired a reputation for 'taking care of the workers' offering relatively generous wages and benefits. This was possible largely due to the brand that was built and the niche market to which it catered. Sole Rosso was known as a traditional kosher product whose local market was relatively insulated from competitive pressures; the factory could therefore afford to pay its workers high wages and continue to produce profitably. The company also ran its own marketing and distribution. Nonetheless, under the 'family's' management, there were latent divisions and tension which erupted into a unexpectedly harsh strike in 1989.

Still, Sole Rosso was quite successful under family ownership and management. Sole opened additional plants in Illinois and California and came to employ a total of 575 workers. In the final years under original ownership, their market share had been increasing, bringing profits and sales up steadily. During this time, the workforce changed dramatically. According to one estimate by an 'old timer', up to the 1980s, as much as 90% of the workforce was comprised of Italian and Albanian workers from earlier migratory waves. Some of these came from families with ties back home with the original owners' family. By the 1990s, after at least a couple employment discrimination suits brought against Sole, the composition of the workforce had changed dramatically. Most of the workers were now more recently arrived Latin American and (to a lesser degree South Asian) immigrants. By this time, the original owners were ready to cash in on the business that had been built up, at a time when large food multinational were seeking to expand and concentrate production, even absorbing lines that might not

be suited to production on a mass scale, like Sole's famous biscotti and breadsticks. In 1992, when total annual sales had reached $65M, they sold the brand and factory to Nabisco. The Nabisco years were characterized by initial uncertainty followed by harmony and stability between management and labor. After an attempt to automate segments of production, management desisted and conceded ample power and autonomy to its employees. In 2000, Nabisco, sapped by the financial machinations of an investment company that used Nabisco's low debt portfolio to leverage more debt for expansions in other areas, sold Sole to Kraft, one of its main competitors. Neither Nabisco nor Kraft was able to make much with this specialized product. By the time Kraft came to own Sole, production in California had been shed to cut labor costs. Kraft would soon abandon the Illinois plant as well, reducing the Sole workforce to 180 workers in the Bronx. Ready to cut its losses, Kraft decided to rid itself of this unprofitable investment. Considered a manufacturing 'under-performer' it was ripe for acquisition by a private equity firm.

Before doing so, however, Kraft initiated a short-lived process of reconciling the production regime with the new requirements for hyper-competitive and flexibilized environment that characterized the food and confectionary sector. In 2003, it went on the offensive against the factory's delivery system and truck drivers precipitating a bitter strike.[7] This move was also a first though unsuccessful attempt by the new management to more formally segment and compartmentalize the workforce, auguring one of the precipitating factors in the current strike.

[7] The media reported it thus: 'The Teamsters local that has shut down the bakery said it will file an unfair labor practice complaint against the bakery's owners, Kraft Food… Some 65 drivers from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters Local 550, based on Long Island, walked off the job at Sole Rosso early last Thursday. The more than 500 bakery and other union workers at Sole Rosso and at other Kraft Nabisco plants in the Eastern region are honoring the strike. Kraft's plan to incorporate the delivery routes in the metro region would eliminate duplication and trim about half the Teamsters' jobs, according to Cathy Pernu, a spokeswoman for the Northfield, IL-based food corporation. Union representatives contend that Kraft wants to replace union labor with nonunion workers.' (Daily News 2.13.09)

In the meantime, the workforce continued to shrink via attrition. The remaining workforce changed while simultaneously retaining many of its original characteristics. Many workers were well established in the factory, having put in years, even decades of experience. Many were from earlier migratory waves and had managed to do fairly well, even owning homes or coops and sending their children to college. These workers were more represented among the more skilled workers, like the mechanics and electricians, and in higher positions in the factory regime, like line foremen. Many of the less skilled positions, particularly among packers, were filled by more recently arrived immigrants, many of whom were women, some single heads of household, and most of whom are not citizens. There was not, however, an even distribution between years of employment and job hierarchy, as many of the unskilled packers, for instance, have been at Sole Rosso for up to 30 years and more.

Still even the least skilled workers with fewer years of 'service' enjoyed decent hourly wages. These wages seemed proper compensation for their ability, cultivated over years of work, to run decades-old, decrepit machines. Veritable dinosaurs, many of the crucial pieces of machinery, such as the ovens, were from the 1940s and 1950s. Replacement parts were hard to come by and repairs, which were naturally quite frequent, were realized largely through the workers' ingenuity. In addition, incorporating more advanced technological segments to production lines was almost impossible as newer machines could hardly be integrated with existing ones. Furthermore, an important portion of the new machinery was designed and built on the premises by Sole's mechanics. Only a sufficient amount of self-management could ensure workers the flexibility and initiative required to keep these machines running smoothly.

Thus, up to the latest sale of the plant, little had changed in the work process in decades. The factory ran five lines in total—4 for cookies and 1 for breadsticks. Each line was divided into four successive stages: mixing, baking, table packing, and box packing. In total, 6 to 7 head foremen oversaw entire

lines, from the initial mixing of the raw materials to the final box packing and wrapping.[8] In addition, approximately 20 machine operators ran the mixers, ovens and packers, those in this last category being more akin to foremen as they oversaw groups of packers. The bulk of the workforce consisted of packers. Sixty were table packers who filled cookies into treys; twenty were end-line packers who placed the treys in boxes and thus closed the entire process. In addition, there were seven or eight stock clerks and twenty sanitation workers including a couple of foremen and six or seven more skilled machine cleaners/maintenance workers. Finally, there were the mechanics whose status rivaled that of the head foremen. The mechanical department comprised three electricians and ten mechanics. Due to the nature of the technology in the plant, this department was indispensable. Such was the composition of the workforce by the time Kraft sold the factory. Though the total workforce was reduced from 180 to approximately 140 during this period, turnover was extremely low. Numbers declined due to aging out. As a consequence, the remaining workers became even more indispensable as they inherited the skill set that departing old-timers had amassed. In the existing production process, the workers were irreplaceable. Even bringing in skilled workers would have posed a challenge—they may have been formally trained in a number of technologies but only with extreme difficulty and after costly amounts of time could they have acquired the necessary aptitude to run the Sole machines.

In 2006, Icewater Partners, a private equity firm, bought Sole from Kraft for a very small sum. Icewater, whose website boasts of its 29% overall rate of return, is an investment firm specializing in obtaining large profits by busting unions. It specializes in 'flipping' companies: they buy up 'under-performing' plants, slashing wages and eroding working conditions, and then resell them at a handsome profit. Icewater's mission was to quickly turn the company around, resell the factory, and thus deliver higher than average returns to its investors with little regard for the stability of the extant production regime. Though business seemed to pick up considerably during 2007 and 2008, revenues were not yet sufficient

[8] Over the years, the numbers of positions per category varied slightly depending on particular needs of the moment.

to meet the expected high yields. So Icewater decided to follow Kraft's lead, turning its attention this time to breaking the main union, Local 80 of BCTM. When contract talks came up in the summer of 2008, Icewater made its severe concessionary demands on the workers. In the meantime, they had taken a series of measures designed to revolutionize production.

In sum, by the 2008 the Sole Rosso regime, which had shaped the honored institutions on the shop-floor, had come under attack by a private equity firm which, preoccupied with flipping the company and disbursing higher than average returns, seemed incapable of appreciating the importance of stability inside the factory. The workers entered the strike when the production regime and games they were accustomed to were in a state of collapse. More importantly, the strike was preceded by at least a couple of shop floor struggles which may have unexpectedly shifted the balance of forces in favor of the workers.

[Alternative explanations:

- **Severity of management offensive provokes inevitable collective action.**
- **Local's role leading workers into strike**
- **Strong bonds because of yrs of service together**
- **Demographics: ethnic communities and pro-labor backgrounds**
- **Outside support from community and activists**
- **Refutation: these conditions are not exclusive to Sole.**
  - **If attacks against workers, strong shop-floor bonds, ethnic ties and pro-labor positions, and outside support were, alone or combined, grounds for militant collective action, we should have seen many more similar episodes, over the last 30 years and during this latest recession in particular. These may be necessary conditions, but they are hardly sufficient. An added ingredient is necessary to transform/activate these into bases for opposition and collective action**
  - **Local's willingness to strike is also insufficient. Might explain strike vote but not endurance of walk-out.**
  - **Since then, another closing bakery in the neighboring section of the Bronx that encompasses same conditions failed to produce even the slightest fight-back.]**

THE PRE-HEGEMONIC REGIME: A DISFUNCTIONAL FAMILY

A hegemonic regime was not established on the Sole Rosso shop floor until the 1990s under Nabisco's ownership. Though most employees and observers recall the previous years under original ownership

as the most stable and peaceful ones, there were, in fact, deep fractures running through factory. These produced antagonisms both among workers, a segment of which was excluded, and between employees and management. Though there is a myth of idyllic times under 'the family', in fact relations were frail. These divisions were severely strained during the 1989 strike. Though management did everything possible to 'regain the trust' of its bitter employees following the dispute, a real hegemonic regime was not constituted until after 'the family' sold the factory and the new management addressed some of the underlying grievances.

Rather than hegemonic, the system under the original ownership can be thought of as patrimonial. Along with the original recipes and machinery, the Italian owners brought with them, and continued to receive, workers from Trieste, their city of origin. Absence of conflict was guaranteed through clientelistic relationships with indebted workers who had been extended employment opportunities despite their lack of skills and knowledge of English. As production expanded, the workforce grew as well. Much of the new workforce was supplied by the steady stream of Italian immigrants that left the same region the owners had come from, many of whom benefited from the networks and patron-client relations formed with the 'family' or with the families of established Sole Rosso workers. This supply of labor was insufficient, however, so management expanded its pools of labor and hired other Southern and Central European immigrants as well as a handful of African American and 'Spanish'—likely some Cuban and definitely some Puerto Rican—workers.

Among the workers, there were deep divisions which, nonetheless, never manifested themselves openly. Patron-client links also characterized the relations between workers, both machine operators and manual laborers, and supervisors. In fact, many workers who entered the plant at the lowest rungs, by obeying the logic of these patrimonial relations, were promoted to supervisory posts. They in turn, dispensed patronage to other subordinate workers. In this scheme, not everyone benefited. Though the contract at the time mandated that promotions be carried out following a formal bidding process in

which seniority, first, and skills, second, were the guiding criteria, more often than not, favoritism was decisive in the granting of jobs. Though client status sometimes matched the seniority and skill requirement, subordinate loyalty often overrode these considerations and deserving workers were passed over.

This treatment was particularly felt among the non-European workers. A couple of thirty year veterans report that in the early 1980s, there were but 3 or 4 African-American workers in the plant, out of a total workforce of approximately 200 workers. Interestingly, these workers, who had been around 'since who knows when', chose to remain in the least attractive department—the 'docks'. Shipping work involved loading, at the time manually ('the forklifts came later') heavy loads on and off trucks. For most workers, this was the least valued work, a starting position from which one escaped as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Black workers, by contrast, voluntarily declined to compete for bids in other departments. They simply preferred to isolate themselves physically in order to avoid the discriminatory climate in 'production'. Unable to 'benefit' from the patronage circuits, they chose the degraded, physically crushing work over degrading treatment from other workers.

The situation was somewhat different for newly arrived Puerto Rican workers. The handful of Puerto Ricans who entered Sole Rosso at the time broke through just as the neighborhood demographics were changing with an influx of new Latin Caribbean residents. Entry was difficult given the inability to gain access through established patron-client ties. Nevertheless, expanding production coupled with the falling off Italian and Central European migration, meant that some new groups had to be employed. New Puerto Rican workers faced tough obstacles yet they were not relegated to the 'docks'. Because some arrived with higher skills, having completed technical training programs or having been employed in other plants, and because there were labor shortages in production, many broke into positions on the shop-floor. A pair of such workers who entered Sole Rosso in the early 1980s described confronting two related difficulties. First, they faced the barriers to promotion that were erected as part of the

clientelism that dominated the plant. This affected both the manual packers and the machine operators. Second, they were treated as competitors rather than peers by the established workforce; while older Italian workers jealously guarded their knowledge from supervisors, they also feared the newcomers' acquisition of these skills might eventually displace them. One worker, Manny, recalls working next to a veteran Italian for years before gaining his trust. It was not until Manny saved him from serious injury or possibly even death by catching him as he plunged head first from the top of a machine that the older worker began viewing him as a peer rather than a threat. The new entrants felt they had to work hard and demonstrate their knowledge and worth before they could 'break into' the shop floor relations as equals. This long and trying struggle, combined with the increasing number of bids that began to open as the original workforce began to retire, allowed for some degree, however slow, of promotion for the new Puerto Rican workers.

Patronage mixed with a tepid reversal of discrimination is hardly the formula for a hegemonic shop floor regime. The frailty of these institutions became readily apparent in 1989 when the workers overcame their traditional deference and surprised management by going on strike. In the past, disagreements during negotiations had ritually come up and been resolved, even if at times after hardnosed bargaining. This time, however, no agreement could be reached. Workers, all advancing in age, began paying more attention their retirement packages than wage increases. That year, workers—particularly the veterans who were precisely the ones who could make demands more forcefully—asked for a 'golden 80' retirement deal. Up to that point, it was understood that all workers brought in through 'the family's' patronage would work at least until the age of sixty-five, irrespective of the total years of work put in. Yet the years of sapping work and example of other industries where the 'golden 80' rule became the norm, convinced workers that theirs was a legitimate demand. For management, it was nothing less than betrayal, a demand qualitatively different than conventional concessions. In the end, management acceded, pressured to resolve the dispute before the seventh week when workers could claim

unemployment benefits and thus enhance their bargaining position. All workers interviewed who experienced that strike reflect critically on the idea that the factory was 'like a family' under the original owners. Indeed, they underscore the fact that after the strike, the 'family was never really able to regain the trust and loyalty of the workers'.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE HEGEMONIC REGIME AT SOLE ROSSO

While there was a 'family', or more accurately a patrimonial, atmosphere under the original ownership, the hegemonic regime was only established at Sole Rosso under Nabisco. Three factors in particular account for the hegemony that emerged under Nabisco beginning in 1992 and which lasted until the Icewater Partners purchased the company in 2006. Firstly, the maintenance department took on a particularly important and incontrovertible role in production. Second, the table packers, the majority of the workforce, beat back a serious challenge and established themselves in a settled position in the shop. Finally, both departments were able to build informal institutions of coordination that allowed for a smooth and productive functioning of the factory, deflecting conflict with management and securing the consent of workers.

If 'the family' was unable to regain the loyalty of the workers, Nabisco implemented a series of changes in labor relations which, rather than eliciting loyalty, incorporated the workers into newly founded production regime. Workers like Joey looked back reflecting that the factory 'was like our home. You could eat on the floor because we took care of that place. You have family there—because that's what we consider ourselves: all family." (Indypendent 2009) His comments refer less to the fragile paternalism that reigned under the 'family' than to the new arrangements that the workers consented to and voluntarily reproduced once Nabisco took over. This familial sense stemmed from the workers' sense of integration into and ownership over the production process. They took care of the place not because they owed loyalty to management, but because they came to believe in the shop floor institutions which they constituted.

Engineering Mechanical Games

The first of these was the sanitation department. Amazingly, when Nabisco first took over, out of approximately 200 total workers, there were forty employees in maintenance, a department that includes mechanics, electricians and general utility men, all referred to informally simply as 'mechanics'. This is an extraordinary ratio for light manufacturing industries. Gene, the head of maintenance, explained that the high number of mechanics was largely the result of the nature of the machinery in the plant. As mentioned above, most of the machinery was decades old, acquired by 'the family' in the 1940s and 1950s; indeed, most of the ovens remained from the original fixed assets with which the factory opened. This heavy machinery was never replaced due to a belief that more modern equipment could not replicate the unique Sole product. Yet to keep the old mixers, ovens and packing machines in production, a cadre of mechanics and machine operators was indispensable. To compensate for the depreciation of the machinery, human element became primary.

Indeed, when new machinery was acquired, much of it was tailor made on the premises by the mechanics themselves. Typically, this involved conveyor systems linking production from the ovens to the packing process. Sometimes the new machines were required to handle new products, in which case an entirely new line would be created; in other instances, more efficient transfer systems were sought to move increased production to packing.[9] Often, management would request the design and construction of new machinery. Not infrequently, however, the conception originated among the mechanics themselves as they suggested ways to improve productivity. Central to this exceptional phenomenon was Amir, referred to with collective pride by the other workers, including the table packers, as the 'brains of the machines'. Among his most outstanding accomplishments were the design of an entire new line and his retrofitting of the ovens with up-to-date programs via his personal laptop. These achievements only reinforced the privileged position held by the mechanics in the plant;

[9] New machinery was fashioned for other purposes as well. Sometimes, supervisors would seek innovations to improve safety conditions.

moreover, given the stability they brought to the entire production process, they were achievements to which all workers laid claim.

This sense of accomplishment was not shared exclusively by the workers. Indeed, the centrality of the mechanics in production was facilitated by the manner in which the maintenance supervisor structured their work. Gene, the head of maintenance, explained that, having grasped the indispensible contribution of the mechanics, he allowed department to function with high degrees of flexibility. The age of the machinery required attention in the most unpredictable ways and moments. Further, the mechanics themselves, aware of their import and its basis, would hardly respond to rigidly defined work rules. Consequently, the mechanics were allowed to structure their time independently. Jack would simply assign them to lines and general projects. 'As long as safety standards were met,' he insisted, 'my guys were free to handle problems as they saw fit, even if it meant bending management directives and contract rules. They could play cards, for all I cared, as long as they got the job done.' Secure in their position, mechanics preferred flexibility in terms of contract enforcement. It was precisely this formula—indispensability, independence, and flexibility—which generated their consent. The consent was reinforced by the freedom to pursue other lucrative jobs on the side. While at times this relatively comfortable position caused some tension and envy among less 'privileged' workers, the mechanics' consent spilled over into other departments. The less privileged table packers were integrated into the hegemonic arrangements through circumstances internal to the packing department. In addition, their consent was linked to and reinforced by the status of the maintenance department through mechanisms that integrated both departments as one unit of production.

Turning the Tables: Incorporation of Packers

The table packers might objectively be considered the most vulnerable segment of the Sole Rosso workforce. As noted above, they have few formally recognized skills to wield as leverage and as recently-arrived immigrant women they have the lowest social status and face the highest costs when

making demands. Further, in the Sole Rosso particular context, they are more open to attacks by management for two reasons. Firstly, even with the disproportionate number of mechanics, the table packers still comprise the bulk of the workforce. Any attempt to cut labor costs would necessarily involve the elimination of these jobs. The likelihood of management targeting packers, secondly, is reinforced by the magnified importance of the mechanics resulting from the idiosyncratic machinery: at first glance, management naturally reasoned that the dexterity of the packers' hands are more easily replaceable than the honed skills of the mechanics.

This was doubtless the calculus of the new Nabisco management. Once the old clientelist system had been effectively dismantled and a new order was established, management turned its attention to making production leaner, including downsizing the workforce. Interestingly, the new table packers, mostly Latin American immigrants, were among those that benefited the most by the removal of the old system. They were able to secure jobs in the packing department without having to contend with the old obstacles of ethnic and national favoritism: as the older Italian packers retired, they were well positioned to gain employment. Yet once they occupied their new posts and stability seemed to accompany the more equitable and meritocratic system that was in place, management determined to introduce a new packing apparatus that would potentially eliminate scores of workers.

Even more interesting, all workers, even the packers facing job loss, seemed to approve of the introduction of the new technology. On the one hand, the mechanics were poised to increase their status as they were tasked with designing and building the new machine. Both mechanics and machine operators report, moreover, that they were unconcerned with job loss. As productivity increased, excess packers could easily be reabsorbed. And as the packers themselves agreed at the time, new hires were entering at a lower rate than loss of employees via attrition. With growing production, all felt that employment for current packers was all but guaranteed.

Just as Nabisco was formalizing management-labor relations, and following the worker-led success in 'turning the factory around', it moved to downsize and streamline. Its major measure was to invest in Canadian technology that would automate packing. The machine fabricated by the maintenance team, while not disastrous, had not immediately produced the desired results. Yet after a period of troubleshooting and fine-tuning, it began to deliver. Nabisco decided, however, possibly reacting to the increased leverage that mechanics acquired as they alone could guarantee the optimal functioning of their machine 'made from scratch', to invest in the Canadian packing machine. Besides disposing of equipment the mechanics built and perfected, the threat against the packers now materialized in earnest. But after it was introduced, foreshadowing events almost a year later, rather than eliminate the packers, the machine's inability to automate the non-standardized Sole product increased reliance on the women packers.

Management's aim was to cut packing personnel on one line in half. Typically, the packing on this line, the most productive one in plant, comprised fifteen workers per shift: nine, one of whom was the supervisor, were stationed on the packing table, followed by six additional packers—five introducing the treys into boxes and one more loading the palette. Under the new arrangement, four packers would be deployed to the transmission segment, guaranteeing a smooth and well spaced transfer and entry of cookies to the machine, two more would fill the boxes, while the final one would load the palette. Unfortunately for management, the new technology was extremely wasteful. The packing machine passed over most of the product, leading to half empty treys yet a floor full of cookies. Despite its obvious limitations, management persisted; it assigned mechanics to adapt the machines to the peculiar features of the Sole products for a couple of months. In the end, it was forced to desist and abandon its investment altogether.

Two notable and successive outcomes were produced by this episode. Firstly, during troubleshooting period, the women packers were asked back into the packing department to manually cover the new

machine in order to reduce wastage. One worker, recognized by all as a packing phenomenon, reported that with their help they were able to packing efficiency back up to 40 palettes per shift. This indicated, both to management and the workers themselves, that their less 'skilled' labor was not quite expendable after all. In fact, given the unevenness of the product, only human labor could proficiently select and place the cookies into treys for packing. Given the age of the ovens and the necessary quasi-artisanal quality of the mixing and elaboration of the dough, downstream modern machinery, which requires exact specifications, is not fitted to handle incoming production. Finally, when the *machine* was discarded and the old packing scheme was resurrected, all table packers were brought back. Their more efficient trey packing in turn required a larger number of box packers. The same table packer estimated that, upon reinstatement, the table packers were able to increase output to sixty to sixty-five palettes per shift. The summoning of the previously discarded table packers demonstrated the need for their skill and knowledge.

Moreover, when table packing returned, management was forced to concede a degree of flexibility in and self-organization on the shift. Whereas before the failed automation packers had semi-autonomously established certain routines, now management was forced, if not to codify it, to fully recognize this prerogative. Leo, a machine operator in the packing department reports that an office worker who came down to the floor, after observing the women at work, remarked in awe that the women 'must have magic in their hands'. This expertise and competence was what obligated management to tolerate the new arrangement. The new autonomy manifested itself in three ways. First, the workers had complete freedom to choose their position at the packing table. Secondly, they established reciprocal schemes of relieving one another. Usually, these consisted in covering for one another during extended breaks and assuming portions of another's expected quota in return for favors, both on and off the shop floor. In response to both, the table and packing supervisors maintained attempts at discipline. The table packers simply shrugged off their immediate supervisor while

forcefully establishing a new rule with the department manager: any complaints would have to be made in the most precise language possible and directed at a specific employee. Paradoxically, this strengthened the position of the women as their collective performance could easily overwhelm the individual reproof. Finally, and most crucially and ironically, with their reasserted aptitude, the table packers were capable of commanding the pace of production. Simply put, their hands picked cookies faster than the ovens could churn them out. One of the foremen confirmed that not infrequently he requested that they decrease their packing rate. Thus, the table packers came to set the limits to production, a limit that the rest of the plant could not reach. Importantly, this allowed the women to reorganize their shift, freeing up time for an array of social activities. Even with long breaks and birthday lunches, the table packers out-performed the new technology. The awkward fit between the automated packer and the entire production process, resulted in both a reinstatement and an improved status of the women; simultaneously, it granted them a level of self-regulation that diffused friction with a management whose disciplinary power had been severely compromised.

The Re-composition of Production Units

The final dimension to the emerging hegemonic regime on the floor of the Sole factory involved the institutions that were built between the maintenance and packing departments.[10] Allusion has already been made to these practices. They involve the productive and social spheres on the floor, and the balance worked out between both.

[10] This paper has focused its attention on the maintenance and packing departments. The principle reasons behind this choice are the numerical majority of packers in the plant and the uncommonly crucial role reserved for the mechanics in production. The quality of the former and the quality of the latter require close examination of these workers. However, as will become apparent below, workers from other departments and hierarchical positions, namely production and foremen, also played an important part in the emergence and collapse of the hegemonic shop floor regime at Sole.

With respect to production, given the nature of the product and the production technology, not only were the knowledge and aptitudes of both mechanics and packers in their respective areas essential, the coordination between both was paramount. **[…]**

It must be noted that the efforts at coordination were never aimed at or used for strengthening the position of workers vis-à-vis management. While the mechanics were well aware of the leverage they enjoyed and the packers all report feeling recognized following the failed introduction of the packing machine, these attitudes did not generate or underpin any sense of opposition to management. Contrariwise, the approach to coordination by both departments can best described as productivist. Workers from both departments insisted that on adapt efforts at coordination for optimal output. Indeed, not only the mechanics had positive views on updating plant technologies. The initial response of packers was, if not favorable, certainly neutral. As mentioned above, often the proposals for new cost-saving machines came from mechanics themselves. Accordingly, when new technology was introduced, the response from both departments was uniformly to do everything possible to 'make it work'. Not even the packers wished for failure; most reported genuine dismay at the waste that the Canadian machine generated. When they were finally brought back, the pride they felt was based less on seeing management so checked, and more on the demonstration that they could pack more efficiently than the machine and thus were advantageous for the firm.

The productivist approach of the workers and its connection to the new regime being forged is best illustrated in the account given by a machine operator of how the night shift 'turned things around' for management. Nabisco's streamlining designs depended on reducing the number of lines while at the same time producing most efficiently in the remaining lines.[11] One initiative in this campaign was the

[11] Many workers felt Nabisco had purchased the plant with the intention of 'running it into the ground'. There was a common belief that in its process of concentration, Nabisco's aim with respect to Sole was to eliminate a small but resilient competitor. These suspicions seemed to be confirmed first when Nabisco removed (and never

failed automation of packing. Another was the general disciplining of the evening shift, which after Nabisco's acquisition, had fallen into a state of disrepair. When the new management arrived, continuity and stability in the plant's bureaucracy suffered more than expected. Many former supervisors took early retirement rather than suffer the transition from culture under the family to the hyper-rationalized, paper-work ridden system being introduced. The attempts to fill the resulting gaps were largely unsuccessful as direct supervisors were promoted to fill the positions that Nabisco's corporate managers, seldom seen at the plant, seemed to rebuff. This loss and shift of managers severed frontline supervisory links to the floor. Direct managers, having accommodated to the new corporate culture, ignored the plant manager's order to 'shape up' the second shift. Consequently, when the workers, responding to their general concerns about Nabisco's aims and the immediate threat from the plant manager, 'lean up, clean up or close down!' as one veteran machine operator and foreman recalls, the workers took up the challenge themselves. Without the benefit of helpful supervision and armed only with the plant manager's directive, the workers themselves 'turned things around'. Waste was eliminated and productivity increased enormously. In fact, as the packers were in the midst of reestablishing their status, new ways were devised to cut waste until stability returned. Improvising, the evening foreman enlisted them in an effort to package lost cookies into leftover bargain single packs. This way, a significant portion of the thousands of pounds of cookies which were being discarded weekly, were put to profitable use. As the foreman relates, and many of the packers confirm, he had no trouble securing the extra help needed to recycle the 'dropped' cookies. All workers were primarily interested in 'making it work' even if it meant lean and automated production.

Significantly, the productivist attitude was realized owing largely to the peculiar authority of the mechanics, the reinstatement of the table packers and the recognition of their competence, and the increasingly autonomous coordination between the various departments. To reiterate, this increase in

---

replaced) three ovens in which asbestos had been detected, and second when it did away with a number of lines that produced cookies that most directly competed with existing Nabisco cookies.

status and autonomy did not result in a repositioning of workers against management. Workers during these years were never confronted with situations to which they would respond with an exercise of leverage against their supervisors. On the contrary, on the bases of this status, the workers were incorporated into a hegemonic shop floor regime. As the workers were granted more independence, their knowledge recognized and their productivity valued, they consented to the unequal and exploitative relations in the plant. Their consent depended on their ability and willingness to build, work through, and reproduce the institutions that emerged once Nabisco purchased the plant from 'the family'. It was the smooth functioning of these institutions that, as Joey described, made the factory 'like our home'.

A SHOCK TO THE REGIME AND BREAKDOWN OF CONSENT: SECOND TIME, TRAGEDY

Stability reigned in the factory until 2006 when Icewater Partners purchased the plant. The hegemonic regime established under Nabisco even withstood the campaign for leaner production which Kraft continued when it bought the plant in 2000. Indeed, the Kraft years were largely eventless—unwilling to take on the order that the workers helped construct on the shop-floor, Kraft soon decided that the investment was hardly worth the effort. It was Icewater's policies which served as a shock to the regime and which provoked the realignment of workers, founded on the very institutions that previously helped generate consent, in opposition to management. The collapse of consent developed around workers' responses to management's efforts at appropriating the mechanics' knowledge and control of plant technology and a second and more aggressive attempt to automate pachinko. Finally, worker opposition was facilitated by the more formal institutional contract apparatus on the floor and the culture of solidarity that grew out of the coordination between the plant's departments.

Offensive against the Mechanics: Taking the Brains off the Shop Floor

The breakdown of consent originated with an abrupt and radical offensive from management. The aggressive drive for domination over production necessarily produced cracks in the order that had been

established in the previous decade. As workers confronted a reordering of their roles and status in the plant, a new form of hegemony failed to emerge. Having been excluded from

Recognizing the power of mechanics, even when reduced to fifteen by 2000, management made several unprecedented attempts to appropriate the knowledge which their unique role had left intact under their control. The objective was the classical one: to acquire full domination over the conceptualization of production and relegate the mechanics to mere executioners of commands from their supervisors. This confrontation came to a head during the strike itself. As the inevitability of the strike became clear, Amir took the simple step of disconnecting his laptop from the old ovens. By doing so, however, he effectively left them 'un-programmed'; not only was management deprived of the possibility of operating the ovens with the most up-to-date specifications which Amir's retro-fitted software commanded, it was left without the knowledge to run the ovens in the original manner. This triggered an extended and intense fight between management and Amir which lasted well into the strike. In fact, in a measure intended as punishment and intimidation for not voluntarily relinquishing his programming and technical expertise, Icewater even pressed charges against Amir in the early days of the walkout.

Many workers, particularly among the table packers, disoriented by the collapsing order in the plant, relived the apprehension of those moments. They feared until the very last moment that Amir would be 'bought off' and surrender his knowledge. In earlier days, he believes, he very likely would have done so, having felt little if any antagonism vis-à-vis management. After all, he was the darling mechanic on the floor, the one who devised plans to raise productivity.

Re-Automating packing: 'Terminating' the Magic

The campaign for control of knowledge of the production process became particularly pronounced in the packing department. In 2008, for a second time, management introduced machinery to automate the table packing department. All those interviewed agreed that the objective was to reduce labor

costs. Leo, who ended up playing a central role in the jostling over the new machinery, suggested that management aimed to run the packing segment of the most lucrative line with only three or perhaps even two workers. Once again, despite the known limitations to automating the end of the line, management doggedly targeted the most labor intensive area of the plant. On this occasion an important difference characterized Icewater's efforts: streamlining production to a handful of lines with the smallest and most flexibilized workforce possible was the only acceptable option. The new owners plan consisted in specialization around three or four products (Kraft had already eliminated five slow-selling varieties, or half of the total) and intensify production with the lowest possible production costs. Jack recalls two episodes that revealed their intentions. In one instance, the new top management organized what amounted to a retreat to another factory in its portfolio. A group of supervisors were taken to visit a model plant: the workforce had been stripped down to one hundred employees, only twenty of whom were regular full-time employees. On another occasion, the director of personnel, formed under the Nabisco regime, upon reading the newly issued employee handbook, which was tantamount to an undeclared assault on the contract, resigned in disgust.

Management proceeded with its restructuring plans in the same brash manner. Two months after acquiring the plant, the new owners gathered all supervisor in a meeting that set the tone: drastic cuts in their holidays (from fourteen to nine) and sick days (from twelve to six) were announced. Shortly thereafter, plans to fully automate the packing department were announced. There would be on emachine each for trey packing, wrapping and boxing. While the technological innovations were rumored to cost $2.7M, they would result in the initial elimination of twenty jobs. Top plant management went ahead with the plan despite the voiced reservations of the more experienced managers. The proceeded to implement the plans on the floor, over the concerns of the packers, machine operators, and foreman who had all learned from Nabisco's attempt at automation, with the same disregard and vigor.

The table packers responded to automation of their 'tables' with alarm. Though some recall feeling compelled to make these machines work according to plan, all were keenly aware of the threat they posed. The state of the art German packing machine, soon dubbed the 'robot' due to the twelve sensor-directed arms, quickly acquired a second nickname in the department. Workers began referring to it as the 'terminator' for its alleged labor slashing efficacy. The attempt at introducing the 'robot' would set of a battle on the shop floor that would realign workers against management.

Predictably, the robot produced the same results as the Canadian machine under Nabisco. Simply stated, the product was too irregular for the sensors which would in turn fail to transmit commands to the arms. Most cookies were waited during the first runs. Management did everything possible to adjust the program to the cookie's actual dimensions, and, while there was some improvement, waste remained at unacceptable levels. The managers then turned to the line foremen requesting that the product itself be made more uniformly. Once more, foremen and mixers used all the knowledge at their disposal to produce even cookies. Yet given the nature of the production technologies, there these efforts ran up against hard limits. In the meantime and yet again, management was reluctantly forced to bring back the table packers to cover for the robot. According to Karen, a table supervisor, when the robot was programmed to pack 'toasts', the number of palettes filled dipped as low as sixteen per shift. Prior to the robot, on a typical shift, table packers filled up sixty-seven palettes. When they were brought back in to reduce the losses instigated by the hyper-particular robot, they managed to raise output somewhere close to sixty palettes.

Under normal circumstances, that is, conditions that prevailed under Nabisco, the impact on the packers of this episode may have been negligible. As suggested above, many of the women were not in principle opposed to the higher productivity which the robot was meant to deliver. Indeed, even when confronted with impending calamities brought on by the 'terminator', the initial response of the packers was to help make Icewater's investment gainful, the same way they had stepped in to 'turn things

around' under Nabisco. All those interviewed, including those most imperiled by the robot, expressed such a cooperative inclination. It was not until it became clear that the new supervisors would not relent that the packers began to perceive their lot as being at odds with the interests of management. As managers insisted on imposing this new technology, against all the experience and wisdom of the workers, these began to realize what they were up against. It was at this point that workers began expressing defiance on the shop floor. Jessenia recalls how at this point a co-worker responded to her supervisors' unyielding efforts to adjust the robot's mechanized arms by proudly punching her own biceps and asserting 'there are no arms like these arms!' In the past, workers, secure in their positions in the shop floor regime, might have lamented the failure. This time, however, all those manifested a disdain for the effort and decidedly partisan satisfaction at the failure.

The Realignment: It All Revolves around Knowledge

The realignment that ensued was facilitated and shaped by maneuvering and conflicts that broke out around the new skills needed to operate and 'rescue' the robot, as well as a renewed campaign by management to appropriate the knowledge amassed by the workers during their years on the floor. One issue that stimulated the emerging opposition concerned training in the operation of the robot. While the natural impulse of management in these situations is to concentrate the knowledge necessary to run labor-saving technology, preferably in its own hands or in a new select layer of technicians, it faces limits in its ability to do so. Firstly, the knowledge itself, isolated from its application to entire production process, possesses little value. Secondly, the formal contractual rules often block this prerogative. In the Sole case, both impediments were at work. The first was underscored by the difficulties in adapting the German machine to the existing antiquated technologies. The second was codified in the contract which required that a bidding process be opened for training for any new machinery. Two things occurred at this point. First of all, given the strained relations with management, mechanics showed little active interests in the bid. Secondly, the top managers, perhaps

influenced by their desire to keep this new knowledge out of their hands, and certainly if momentarily reassured by the expert installer and trouble-shooter the machine's manufacturer loaned the plant, did little to free the mechanics up from their current tasks. In the end, only one worker, Leo, a packing machine operator who had acquired vast knowledge of the plant as a one-time general utility man, was informally trained to operate the robot. Whether this was a deliberate move on management's part is unclear. If indeed management sought to contain all the skills in one worker's hands which it could then, in an equally informal process, appropriate, the outcome was hardly as intended. As management's offensive continued yet reliance on table packers increased, Leo guarded his newly acquired knowledge, sharing it exclusively and partially with the women in his department that, in order to bail out the robot, required some degree of knowledge of its operation. Naturally, this only enhanced their opposition to their supervisors. In the end, the concentration of these new skills in Leo's hands placed him in a formidable position on the shop-floor. As Jack recalls, operation of the entire plant, given the centrality of the newly acquired technology, came to depend squarely on Leo. If the robot was not in running order, the ovens could not be started.

The training episode highlights the underlying struggle that was taking place and which shaped the new alignments on the floor. Management's offensive, of which the new technology was a major tactic, placed a new political premium on control of knowledge. The coordination between departments that Sole operations necessitated now helped generate an axis along which the new opposition was organized. Adapting the robot to the older machines only deepened the new demarcation lines. Programming modifications, shifts to other lines, and adjustments to match varying plant circumstances could only be performed by workers who understood the requirements for integrating the robot to existing technologies and conditions. The well established coordination links began to serve another more overtly political purpose at this point as shop-floor leaders who emerged from among mechanics

and foreman successfully counseled the women on tactics with which to respond to management encroachments.

As the challenge to management became more overt, their attempts to appropriate and control knowledge of production also became more pronounced. These efforts intensified as contract negotiations became protracted and headed toward impasse. Workers report enduring increased surveillance during this period. New cameras and closed circuit equipment were installed at sensitive points in the plant. On the one hand, management effectively sought to prevent workers from using their newly acquired knowledge of the robot for purposes of sabotage. On the other, it aimed to learn as much as possible through observation of the daily tasks performed by all workers. Under Nabisco, management had desisted in its efforts to automate. Even during the earlier strike under original ownership, management had not attempted to acquire the workers' knowledge in order to maintain the plant in operation. Now, the new managers pushed even further as they actively sought to acquire the pool of information which had been voluntarily ceded to workers in the previous regime. Employees understood what was at stake. Jessenia recounts an anecdote which demonstrates the antagonizing impact of management's campaign and the workers newly found sense of opposition. On one occasion, as management was gearing up for the impending strike, it sent down an administrative employee to learn how to operate one of the newly acquired wrapping machines. Though all the table packers heeded the foremen and mechanics' recommendations regarding transfer of knowledge to management, Jessenia and her friends decided to exploit this particular occasion to assert themselves. Feigning ignorance of the administrators' motivations, Jessenia agreed to a demonstration. Having set the machine at an extraordinarily high speed, she handled it effortlessly. When Jessenia entreated her uninvited guest to have a go, intimidated and deterred, she promptly abandoned the floor. This oppositional dynamic was further fueled during the weeks immediately preceding the strike as management attempted to build up the plant's stocks. Though at too late a juncture according to most

workers interviewed, employees refused to cooperate and boycotted overtime opportunities. As management and administrative employees alone were forced to step in and get the shop floor running, their campaign to appropriate shop floor knowledge intensified.

Institutional Facilitators

As shop floor consent collapsed, workers across plant departments and hierarchies began to align against and confront management. Their antagonism and resistance to management transformed into active shop floor opposition thanks in part to impact on existing institutions of hegemony and the immediate outcome of these efforts. Yet these conflicts around established games and practices alone cannot account for the active realignment. Another basis for this opposition was the institutions and culture that governed intra-employee relations. Without these facilitating factors, it is unclear that the realignment in opposition to management would have been as comprehensive and solid as it became in the lead-up to the strike.

The first of these factors was the incorporation of the foremen into the contract. Unlike the vast majority of industrial contracts which exclude foremen, the Sole bargaining agreement covered these supervisory workers. If the number of foremen had shrunk to a dozen and their authority on the floor was rivaled by the status of the mechanics, their position was pivotal. As they were the employees that oversaw the complete process and guaranteed the vital coordination between areas, they were central figures around whom shop floor alignments could turn.

The industrial relations literature on foreman concedes that as employees they find themselves in contradictory class locations. Nichols and Beynon's work shows how generational and life-trajectory differences, along with top management tactics, push foremen into its orbit or push them to identify more readily with their subordinates (Nichols and Beynon 1977). Others writing decidedly from the perspective of business discuss how the introduction of collective bargaining and managed labor

relations threaten to undermine the foreman's authority and alienate him from top management. As management's frontline representative, care is taken to redefine his role and reassure his utility for the firm (Slichter, Healy and Livernash). In general the literature emphasizes the need to restore and/or reproduce the disciplinary role of foremen.

On the Sole floor, discipline was never the main function of foremen. On the contrary, given the features of the work process and the technology, foremen were centrally concerned with coordinating and technically improving production. They assisted the others, primarily machine operators and packers, rather than regulate them. Their role on the floor acquired special importance considering their formal coverage under the contract. Had the plant regime called on them to play a disciplining role, their inclusion in the agreement may have been inconsequential. Yet given their formal separation from management, the contract turned them, in a sense, into additional stewards on the floor. 'It is quite exceptional,' notes Clayton, the Local treasurer. 'None of the other shops we represent have this. At Sole, we didn't have to worry about the foremen. They helped organize the workers for the strike.' Though not all foremen were active in swinging the workers they oversaw against management, three of them in particular provided additional leadership in reshaping the balance of forces on the shop floor.[12]

The second factor that played a crucial role in translating resistance and antagonism into active opposition was the culture of solidarity that existed across the shop floor. As described above, the social ties within and between departments were built on the hegemonic institutions that emerged under Nabisco and the essential coordination which the production process necessitated. The table packers, having established mechanisms for the social organization of their tasks and for collective identity formation, took the lead in spreading their socialization means across the plant. Significantly, this collective organization of work was rooted in the very need to coordinate production. But while the

[12] Enzo, a mechanic, bargaining committee member, and key leader of the strike, stated that throughout his years at Sole, including the immediate prelude to the strike, he still viewed many of the foremen with suspicion.

mechanics had been in a privileged position to shape their own work, they had enjoyed the benefits individually. The table packers, by contrast, devoted the time freed up through their coordinated efforts with 'production' to developing and strengthening ties of friendship and mutual support with other departments and other ranks. Maria joyfully recounted the birthday parties she and her peers would organize for Leo, Louie and others: 'We loved them so much. It was our way of demonstrating our *compañerismo* and showing how much we appreciated their support.' This reciprocity was particularly evident with respect to the packing machine operators and foremen as the relations with mechanics were never fully consolidated. Besides undermining the potential for division among the workforce, these ties served to elevate and legitimate the authority of a layer of skilled workers who eventually became prominent leaders of the strike.

Naturally, just as not all foremen facilitated the shop floor realignment, not all employees were integrated into the solidary circuits that developed in the plant. In fact, there remained a significant mass of workers who did not come to identify with the new opposition and whose support, or lack thereof, could have played a more decisive role in shaping the new balance of forces. These workers who were either skeptical or simply remained loyal to management, were often veteran workers who had been formed under the 'family's' system of patronage. They constituted a potential active base of support for management. Significantly, their consent had been preserved through the struggles around the hegemonic shop-floor institutions that Icewater detonated. Where these confrontations and their results failed to fully realign workers against management, the contract provisions for foremen and the solidarity ties laid on top of the production process served to bolster a new balance of forces that might otherwise succumbed to vulnerabilities.

DISCUSSION […]