

BLOOD, SWEAT, AND FEAR

VIOLENCE AT WORK IN
THE NORTH AMERICAN
AUTO INDUSTRY, 1960–80

Jeremy Milloy



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1

Dripping with Blood and Dirt

Confronting the History of Workplace
Violence under Capitalism

“We doe declare that we counte it a kind of Rebellion for a
servant to threat, assault, or strike his master.”

– ACTS AND ORDERS OF RHODE ISLAND, 1647

“Kill my boss? Do I dare live out the American dream?”

– HOMER SIMPSON, 1993

In 2013, Tennessee and Alabama joined twenty other US states that had passed legislation allowing workers to keep firearms in their cars while on the job. The debates over these “Bring Your Gun to Work” laws pit two of the most cherished tenets of American political culture against each other: the right to bear arms versus the right of employers to dictate what occurs on their premises. Opponents of the laws claim they encourage deadly acts of workplace violence. Supporters argue that giving workers access to their weapons enables self-defence at work and while commuting. Looming over this debate is the conviction that the disgruntled worker with a gun poses a compelling danger in today’s workplace.

Mark Hogan, FedEx’s vice-president of US security, testified before Tennessee’s legislature in 2012 that banning all weapons at work, whether on the shop floor or in the parking lot, allows “an opportunity for the employee to cool off before they take an irrational action in response to something

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that happens at work.”¹ A reader comment posted online in response to a *Wall Street Journal* article about these laws asks us to

stop for a moment and think. How many of your current coworkers do you know well enough to know whether they have an explosive temper or not? How many of your current coworkers have given you personal access to their confidential medical records, so that you can determine whether they have ever been treated for mental health issues or not? How many of your coworkers do you know well enough to know whether they own a gun or not?²

We did not always think about violence at work this way. From the start of the Industrial Revolution well into the twentieth century, people discussed and debated the violence that resulted from work under capitalism. However, this violence was not viewed as an individual matter but as class struggle, a titanic clash between the employing class and the waged mob, which at times threatened the order of society itself. According to some, this struggle was rooted in the violent expropriation that had been necessary to enact industrial capitalism. In *Capital*, economist and socialist Karl Marx wrote of this expropriation of the means of production through the expulsion of peasants from land and into the wage-labour market, where surplus value was extracted from their labour by capitalists. He concluded, “if money, according to [French dramatist Émile] Augier, comes into the world with a congenital blood-stain on one cheek, capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt.”³

To Marx, the working day of Victorian Britain was a battleground where the “vampire” of capital sought to suck every bit of labour from the worker, often at the cost of the worker’s childhood, children, mind, spirit, health, or even her very existence.⁴ Capital, he wrote, “extends the worker’s production-time within a given period by shortening his life.” Expanding the working day beyond twelve hours produced “violent and unmeasured encroachments” on every aspect of working people’s lives.⁵ Workers were thus compelled to organize and pressure the state to regulate capital and shorten the working day, in what Marx called a “civil war,”⁶ lest they or their family were to be literally worked to death.⁷

Since then, many writers and workers have called attention to the violence of capitalist labour processes. To consider the meat industry alone, Upton Sinclair at the beginning of the twentieth century, in fiction, and Eric

Schlosser at the end, in journalism, both revealed vividly the decimating toll of wage work on working people. Until recently, however, *individual* workplace violence was not generally seen as an aspect of workplace health and safety concerns.⁸

In Canada and the United States, the establishment of capitalism was linked with imperial processes of expropriation and domination, most importantly settler colonialism and slavery. In the nineteenth century, when employers pioneered industrial capitalism, the violence of expropriation and accumulation was complemented by a different violence, one born of the struggles of industrial relations. The period from the mid-nineteenth century until the early twentieth was an age of mass violence. Names like Haymarket, Homestead, Pullman, and Ludlow evoke deadly clashes of workers with the forces of employers and the state. Early industrial relations in Canada were much less explicitly violent, but they did not lack for conflict either, as demonstrated by examples such as the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 and the Ridgeway Riot of 1968.⁹ Like the violence present at capitalism's birth, this later violence has been understood by observers then and now as a manifestation of class conflict, a systemic feature of a rapacious capitalist system. Many believed these conflicts would threaten the very survival of liberal capitalism itself if the inequality and exploitation that sparked them were not mollified. Some North American elites began thinking about managing conflict rather than simply repressing worker activism. After the 1910 *Los Angeles Times* bombing killed twenty people, Congress established the Commission on Industrial Relations.¹⁰ After hearing from such partisans in class conflict as industrialists John D. Rockefeller and Henry Ford, labour organizer Mary Harris ("Mother") Jones, and labour leader William ("Big Bill") Haywood, the divided commission issued three separate reports, which respectively called for establishing labour boards, establishing industrial democracy, and strengthening trade unions.

William Lyon Mackenzie King, Canada's minister of labour in the early 1900s, was a significant transnational figure in the developing management of class conflict. King's Industrial Disputes Investigation Act of 1907 set up the Canadian state as arbiter of conflicts in utilities, railways, and coalmines. The Act was designed to promote labour peace and the uninterrupted working of the economy through boards of arbitration, compulsory mediation, and a cooling-off period before strikes or lockouts were permitted.¹¹ Transitioning to the US private sector in 1914 as a consultant in the emerging field of industrial relations, King advised the Rockefellers during and after

the Colorado Coal Wars, before returning to Canada and becoming the nation's longest-serving prime minister. The reforms of King and US president Franklin D. Roosevelt during the 1930s and 1940s, notably the Wagner Act in the United States and Order-In-Council PC 1003 in Canada, blunted the sharpest points of open class conflict. Most scholars have agreed with historian Richard Hofstadter's judgment that "violence in labor disputes flared up in a last ugly climax in the 1930s and then abruptly died away."¹²

After the Second World War, capital, labour, and the state went forward on the basis of what is often called "industrial legality" in Canada and "workplace contractualism"¹³ in the United States. This postwar settlement, epitomized in the auto industry by Canada's Rand Formula and by the United States' 1947 Treaty of Detroit, recognized and safeguarded nonradical unions. It created a framework for orderly, regulated union organizing and negotiations. It shifted the boundaries of industrial labour conflicts and eliminated their bloodiest excesses. The frontier of organizing and collective bargaining was enclosed in boardrooms and courtrooms. In the era of the postwar settlement, anti-union legislation, red-baiting, capital flight, and highly paid union-avoidance attorneys replaced the Pinkerton Detective Agency, police, and strikebreakers as the cornerstone of anti-union efforts.

Class conflict did not disappear, of course, and workplace struggles still exploded into public violence at times. Canadian examples include union buster Harold ("Hal") Banks's government-sponsored paramilitary campaign against the Canadian Seamen's Union; the violent struggles of *les gars de Lapalme* against the federal government and eventually against their own labour union in the Quebec United Aircraft strike, which was marked by physical altercations, bombings, and attacks on the homes of United Aircraft executives; and the 1978 killings of Robin Hood strikers in Montreal by a gang of paid strikebreakers in the employ of professional wrestler Paul Leduc.¹⁴ In the United States, the National Guard was called out in several states during the 1970s to quell violence stemming from job actions by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. United Farm Workers campaigns in California were marked by repeated incidents of violence. Struggles between the coalminers and the coal companies of Harlan County, Kentucky, continually featured violence. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated while in Memphis to support a bitter strike by sanitation workers.¹⁵ We also know that the violence inherent to capitalism, the everyday, often unremarked violence of workplace injuries and death, certainly continued. Nonetheless, the overall trend is clear. Mass violence decreased. Capital, unions, and the state delegitimized and de-emphasized violence as an element in labour conflict

in the postwar era. As the title of historian Robert Michael Smith's account of anti-unionism puts it, briefcases replaced blackjacks.¹⁶

Over the past forty years, however, the postwar settlement has been abandoned. Capitalism has discarded the limited security of Fordism and opted for the enhanced precarity and intensity of neoliberal production. Inequality has expanded as rights and safeguards won by working people have been destroyed or abandoned by employers and governments. Many observers have commented that today's economic arrangements look much more like the Gilded Age or the 1920s than they do the 1950s. Yet an age of mass class violence has not returned with them. Where did the mob go? What happened to these titanic battles? Whereas once the face of workplace violence was the mob, now it is the loner. Accounting for why we stopped fearing class war and began fearing the lone gunman "going postal" is the concern of this book.

To understand what happened, we must return to the postwar period with a new perspective. Historians have so far paid little attention to labour violence from the 1940s to the present. This makes sense, given the tendency in these years toward legalism and the regulation of conflict between employers, workers, and the state. But that is not the whole story. Violence at work did not disappear. It mutated. Between the Second World War and the 1980s, the prevailing mode of violence by workers gradually moved away from collective violence and toward individual violence.

Consider the automotive industry, which was not simply North America's most important economic sector of the postwar era but also the birthplace of the Fordism that underwrote the postwar settlement. Violence forged the very history of auto work, Fordism, and auto unionism. In the 1920s and 1930s, workers on both sides of the border had to defend their union organizing against the violence of the state and company thugs, which in Detroit, Michigan, culminated in the 1937 Battle of the Overpass, a brutal assault on organizers of the United Automobile Workers (UAW) by Ford Motor Company security guards. In Windsor, Ontario, Detroit's border neighbour, the fight to organize was often accompanied by physical confrontations.¹⁷ Violence shaped the automotive workplace in other ways, from the hate strikes that white men and women conducted against the hiring or promotion of black men and women to the sexual harassment and assaults directed against female workers flooding into wartime auto plants.¹⁸ Beyond the clashes and assaults, there was the simple fact that even after unionization the often dangerous conditions of auto plants – "a gold-plated sweatshop," as UAW leader Walter Reuther called General Motors in 1964 – posed a real

threat of death and dismemberment to the people who made cars and trucks in North America.¹⁹ As autoworker Charles Denby wrote of Ford in his classic memoir *Indignant Heart*, “they said it was the house of murder.”²⁰

After the 1940s, the massive battles over organizing ceased. But violence was still a significant aspect of the North American auto industry during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. This violence was both structural and individual. It was primarily caused by conditions on the job, not by the psyches of individuals. Although it was shaped by the class relations of work at Chrysler Corporation, it was also mediated by relations of race and gender, as well as by factories’ national and local contexts. This violence mattered. Depending on the context, violence was used to enforce prevailing norms or to contest relations of power in the workplace. It influenced how auto work was done, the culture and politics of the workplaces, the safety of workers, and the stability of the plants themselves. Occasionally, violence at work also made an impact beyond the factory or union hall, forcing a wider public to reckon with the effects of workplace violence in courtrooms and the media.

How much violence there was, what forms it took, what impact it had, and what people thought about it were not stable but historically contingent. These factors depended on time and place. In the 1950s individual violence erupted occasionally, but not frequently, at the Hamtramck Assembly Plant, known as Dodge Main, Chrysler’s flagship Detroit plant. Workers rarely assaulted supervisors. Beginning in the late 1950s, however, well before the early 1970s crisis of profitability that historians have identified as a major turning point in postwar labour relations, Chrysler instituted several practices that are now considered fundamental to neoliberal workplace regimes. By the end of the decade, Chrysler had undermined worker traditions of job control and claimed dominance over the production process. Over the next ten years, the company sped up production, laid off workers, and refused to invest in plant safety. It hired a new crop of African American employees who had less seniority and stability than previous generations of workers. Chrysler used supervisory harassment, mandatory overtime, and frequent firings to ensure Dodge Main’s workers met the new production quotas.

Black workers called this process “Niggermation.”²¹ It resulted in a working environment and industrial culture defined by fear, hostility, and danger. Workers responded with violence. After 1965 incidents of individual violence became more and more common at Dodge Main. Workers punched each other. They hit each other with crowbars. They stabbed each other. They tried to run each other over in the parking lot. Sometimes, they killed

each other. And they attacked supervisors and plant guards with fists, knives, and guns. In 1970 *Newsweek* chose Dodge Main as the emblematic example of America's violent factories, calling it

a grimy, 59-year-old pile of red brick and concrete harboring 9,000 of the most frightened, angry workers in America. The work force is a volatile mixture of Poles, blacks, and southern whites and, to hear some of them tell it, the man who doesn't pack a gun, a knife, or a length of pipe with his lunch break sandwich is either a fool or suicidal.²²

Similar conditions prevailed at Chrysler plants throughout the city. In June 1970 James Johnson, a black worker at Chrysler's Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle Plant, responded to racist mistreatment and in-plant stress and violence by murdering two supervisors and a co-worker. In 1973 Regis Lantzy, general foreman of Chrysler's Jefferson Avenue Assembly Plant in Detroit, was murdered by autoworker Tilden Engle. Another Chrysler supervisor, this one working at the Huber Foundry, was murdered on the job by foundry worker Fred Simon. These were individual actions that occurred for a variety of reasons, some knowable but many not. Taken together, however, much of the individual violence that convulsed Chrysler plants in Detroit was a resistance by workers against the terms of their employment and against the violence and racism that often governed it. This violent rebellion in Detroit auto factories posed significant threats to those who worked there and was a major concern for the auto companies, the UAW, and outside observers. It interacted and overlapped with radical political organizing at the plants in complex, contradictory ways.

Chrysler plants in Windsor did not experience the same crisis of violence. Why not? Principally, Chrysler could not institute a policy of "Niggeration" at its Windsor plants. The national and local context compelled Chrysler to operate differently, while empowering Windsor Chrysler's UAW local to be more militant and effective than its Detroit counterparts. The result was a very different work environment. Well into the 1970s, workers continued to exercise some of the bottom-up control largely destroyed at Dodge Main in the late 1950s, so they maintained greater in-plant and union solidarity, albeit one weakened by racial and gender exclusion. Still, workers in Windsor did regularly employ violence as part of a masculinist work culture to enforce norms, settle disputes, regulate the behaviour of supervisors, and intimidate the women who began working at Windsor plants in the late 1970s. And as in Detroit, Windsor was rocked by an auto-industry murder

during the 1970s. The killing of UAW Local 444 president Charlie Brooks by fired autoworker Clarence Talbot raised questions about violence and racism in the city's auto culture.

The example of Chrysler in Windsor and Detroit demonstrates that even in workplaces that were in the same industry, owned by the same company, and staffed by workers represented by the same union, there were significant differences in violence's prevalence, uses, expressions, and impacts. Therefore, looking at violence at work in a regional framework is essential. That is especially true for the 1960s and 1970s, the sunset of the postwar settlement and the dawn of a neoliberal order that would change the nature of work and thus the nature of workplace violence. A regional frame allows us to isolate the key causes of violence and to understand differing perceptions of violence. By comparing and contrasting violence in Chrysler plants in two contiguous cities, separated by a national border but joined in a continental production and export market, we gain clarity and perspective on fights, assaults, and murders. We see that workplace violence was not simply the product of individual conflicts and choices but was instead a phenomenon influenced by structural factors that were industrial, local, and national.

Analysts of the automotive industry have long recognized the need to place Detroit and Windsor in regional perspective as part of the Rust Belt, or Great Lakes, region, a link in what has become a global auto-production chain.²³ Historians of auto work or Detroit have generally not followed their lead until recently. This book joins work by Steven High, Tracy Neumann, and Jason Hackworth in considering Rust Belt experiences regionally and thus across the 49th parallel.²⁴ Doing so offers opportunities and presents challenges. It enables a comparison of plant-level, local, and national dynamics. It allows us to examine holistically the actions and perspectives of an employer (Chrysler) and a union (the UAW) that thought and acted regionally and transnationally. However, the differences between plant, city, and nation require careful discernment. A simple apples-to-apples comparison would flatten out the crucial differences in history, economics, culture, and politics that distinguish the American and Canadian contexts and the uneven development of capitalism in these two places. I have also taken care not to divert our understanding of these linked but distinct histories into a conceptual cul-de-sac by describing one city or state as more racist or more conservative. I seek to understand and explain, not to falsely valorize one or another national example of capitalism buttressed by racial and gender hierarchy.²⁵

It is by reading the meaningful differences between Chrysler plants in Detroit and Windsor that we can learn important lessons about the causes of workplace violence. The varying levels of violence at work in the two cities were mostly determined by the greater in-plant impact of racial inequality in Detroit and by Chrysler's greater power to dictate working conditions in Detroit than in Windsor, where its conduct was regulated by the Canada–United States Automotive Products Agreement (or Auto Pact). This inequality was itself the outgrowth of the structural violence of American white supremacy. Canada also is and was a society of racial hierarchy, but its particular features have produced fewer incidents of physical violence. Other key differences proved relatively unimportant, such as between the two countries' national labour movements, labour law frameworks, national political histories, and treatment of violence as part of popular culture or national mythologies, as well as between the strategies of UAW Canada leadership and those of the UAW at Solidarity House in Detroit.

Is my argument, then, that Detroit's workplace violence was racial violence mediated by class and gender, whereas Windsor's class conflict was mediated by race and gender? No. As the actor with the greatest impact on the condition of those workplaces, Chrysler bears the greatest responsibility for the elevated risk of violent harm faced by workers. However, comparing these workplaces does demonstrate how the risk of workplace violence was mediated by relations of race and gender on the job and by Chrysler's relative position in Detroit compared with Windsor. The closely connected, mutually reinforcing power disparities of class, race, and gender, which are themselves forms of structural violence, were crucial in fostering violence at work.

Placing Detroit and Windsor in a regional frame also gives us a new view on urban and national histories. The fate of Detroit and Dodge Main shows how destructive capitalist transformation and racial inequalities can be in combination. In 1981 Dodge Main itself was demolished, and Detroit was enduring a post-Fordist annihilation from which it has yet to recover. Detroit's decline has become so iconic, its suffering so widely consumed, that we are in danger of adopting a complacent assumption that what happened to Detroit was inevitable, the product of vast, impersonal forces. Placing Detroit in its regional context reminds us that this was not the case. Detroit's fate was the outcome of choices made by governments, corporations, unions, and others during specific historical moments. Analyzing violence and class conflict at Windsor plants suggests that whiteness may have been a previously understudied reason for UAW Canada's nationalism in the late 1970s

and early 1980s, which culminated in the 1985 split of the UAW's Canadian locals from UAW International and the creation of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW). The importance of violence in regulating acceptable shop floor conduct and codes of workplace masculinity indicates that everyday violence has been a greater part of Canadian working-class history than generally appreciated. In terms of violence at work, borders mattered a great deal. The national border that divided this region may have been porous when it came to the exchange of people, ideas, and capital, but it was a crucial contextual factor that shaped very different workplace experiences.

Taking individual violence seriously and assessing it regionally not only enhances our understanding of place but also allows us to better understand time, specifically the historical shift from Fordist production to what we now think of as neoliberal production. That violence spiked in Detroit plants in the late 1960s and early 1970s is not solely a reflection of resistance to the degradation of work due to the exploitation of racial inequalities and union weakness. Nor is it indicative of some kind of violent pathology among the city's autoworkers. If we widen our gaze, we see that it also demonstrates how the death of Fordism and the birth of what we now consider neoliberal production was a violent process. Looking at auto work in the 1950s and 1960s shows that many of the features of the current labour market identified as hallmarks of neoliberal production go back a long way. Autoworkers, by reputation the aristocracy of the postwar industrial working class, endured frequent layoffs, probationary employment periods, and intensified production. This transition in production occurred unevenly in place and time. However, between 1950 and 1980, the general trend of labour-process changes in the North American auto industry was away from traditions of worker solidarity and shop floor control and toward managerial control and atomization. These changes and the intensification of work that they often facilitated were sometimes accompanied by violence. Journalist Mark Ames, whose path-breaking research on workplace shootings originally inspired this book, has demonstrated that when neoliberal work arrangements became widespread in the 1980s and 1990s, workplace massacres became common.²⁶ This study shows that the beginnings of these arrangements, and violent resistance to them, existed well before that time.

In doing so, it provides a historical dimension generally lacking in the literature on the topic. Ames's work contains many crucial insights but largely focuses on workplace massacres from the 1980s on. Similarly, lawyer and legal consultant Ronald D. Brown's *Dying on the Job* analyzes workplace

murders only and again largely from the past few decades.²⁷ Much of the other literature on workplace violence that has appeared in the past twenty-five years approaches the subject without any historical perspective. Ames and Brown are correct that changing workplace cultures and more intense labour regimes contributed to an almost certain spike in workplace homicides starting in the 1980s. This study, by historicizing this spike in the context of a sustained analysis of violence in a single company over many years, significantly expands our understanding of violence at work – its causes, effects, and how these aspects changed over time. Therefore, it gives historical context for the emergence of the mass shooting as a recurring form of public violence.

It also allows us to see how workplace violence connected with, and contributed to, larger historical shifts. Historicizing workplace violence challenges received ideas about work and capitalism in postwar North America. Initial histories tended to emphasize a rapprochement between capital and argued that open conflict between workers and bosses was largely diverted into the bureaucratic arenas of grievances and arbitration. As this book shows, this argument obscures the ways that bureaucracy, workplace conflict, and violence intersect. The historian Stephen Norwood writes that after the Second World War, anti-union efforts “came to rely less heavily on brute force,” and “men’s labor militancy ... declined considerably.”²⁸ However, although violence between groups of workers and the organized forces of capital or the state is almost unheard of today, individual violence has become a significant concern. What scholars have largely overlooked is that violence itself changed, first in ways that reflected resistance and control in an increasingly bureaucratized mass society and then in ways that reflected the dislocation and disconnection of those workers who experienced their work life as atomized individuals.²⁹

A system of production in which management’s will was checked to an extent by traditions of workers’ control existed at Dodge Main until the early 1960s and in Windsor well into the 1970s. This system of production was characterized by insider violence. Insider violence was largely an expression of class conflict and the enforcement of norms – directed both upward at supervisors and downward at lower-status employees – by workers who had a stable union, some degree of power and autonomy, and a measure of shared identification, whether through class, ethnicity, religion, neighbourhood, or family links with management and union leaders.³⁰ Their class position rested on a shared commitment to the Fordist accord by capital and

labour and on exclusions of race and gender. In Detroit in the 1960s, auto companies pioneered forms of work organization that anticipated the transformations of neoliberalism. Chrysler took control of the shop floor, brought the union to heel, and accomplished an intensification of work through the exploitation of racialized workers with less status, seniority, job power, and union support. The violence perpetrated during the late 1960s and early 1970s by these individualized, more excluded, mostly African American workers was outsider violence enacted by those without power or stability in the workplace, whose perspective and concerns were largely unknown and unappreciated by the mostly white members of Chrysler management and UAW leadership. Although individual violence often represented a contestation of power relations in the plant, it was not connected to a meaningful system of worker control, whether formal or informal. It was rebellion without foundation or program. In Detroit radical black workers' organizations that did have such a program, notably the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), attempted to use these incidents of violence to build race and class consciousness, solidarity, and worker power. DRUM was trying to craft a moral economy among workers and to use the symptoms of their outsider status to make outsiders into insiders. In the context of Windsor and the Auto Pact, Canadian Chrysler workers were able to maintain their insider status, and the relative shop floor power on which it rested, for several years after it was destroyed in Detroit. Therefore, the type of violence that prevailed at Windsor plants throughout the 1960s and 1970s was largely insider violence.

The prevalence of outsider violence at Dodge Main in the late 1960s and early 1970s was a harbinger of the eruptions of outsider violence that have occurred in both American and Canadian workplaces, but especially in the United States, since the 1980s. In the 1980s and 1990s, as Ames has shown, capital established neoliberal modes of production across white-collar and blue-collar workplaces. Outsider violence, in the form of the one-man murderous rebellion, became much more common, prompting widespread alarm and speculation in the mass media. The media, along with a battalion of newly minted workplace violence experts, tended to define workplace violence as a new problem, without an appreciation of violence's long history in the North American workplace. Nor did media, experts, and later policy makers deeply consider political economy, structural violence, or the role of corporate policies and the labour process in producing violent reactions. They focused instead on a psychological analysis of a disgruntled worker

likely to “snap” and target co-workers and bosses.³¹ Looking at Chrysler plants in Detroit and Windsor demonstrates that this focus is misguided.

As this brief outline indicates, violence at auto plants in Detroit and Windsor was about much more than individual psychology. Nor was it solely a symptom of the labour process and class conflict. Violence was itself a key influence on the labour process, the work culture, and the consciousness of workers, supervisors, and management. As I researched and wrote this book, the impact of this violence became a major concern. At the beginning of the project, I was primarily interested in finding out how much violence had taken place, what caused it, and what had been done to stop it. Upon learning how much violence there was, I began to consider how much this violence, and the constant awareness of the risk of violence, affected the people who entered these plants every day and thus shaped the workplace as a whole. I realized that to assess violence’s impact, I had to expand my consideration beyond any single fight or workplace fatality and consider violence’s influence on social relations and workplace culture. In addition to investigating violence as a product of conflicts at work, I began to appreciate how violence itself was a productive force, informing the outlook and strategies of workers far beyond any single event. Finally, I had to wrestle with what exactly should be considered violence. In thinking through these issues, I found insightful the words of novelist Richard Wright in his recollection of the power of white violence to affect his fundamental view of himself in the American South prior to the Second World War:

The hostility of the whites had become so deeply implanted in my mind and feelings that it had lost direct connection with the daily environment in which I lived ... It was as though I was continuously reacting to the threat of some natural force whose hostile behavior could not be predicted. I had never in my life been abused by whites, but I had already become conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings. The penalty of death awaited me if I made a false move and I wondered if it was worthwhile to make any move at all ... Indeed the white brutality that I had not seen was a more effective control of my behavior than that which I had seen.³²

Wright’s words testify powerfully to violence’s ability to exert influence beyond the particulars of any single incident, conditioning identity, behaviour, and possibility while limiting the freedom and expression of those at

risk. If, as Marx wrote, one makes one's own history but within circumstances not of one's own choosing, violence is a key way that those circumstances are circumscribed.³³ The American South of which Wright writes provides just one example of how people have used violence both to contest and to protect an oppressive social order.

How did violence exert its influence on the hearts and minds of the men and women who worked in North American auto plants? To understand the impact of violence at work, we must transcend a binary view of violence as simply a socially constructed product of various conflicts or as something stemming solely from individual psychology. The best way to do this is to treat violence as a variable worthy of sustained attention in itself. Reflecting the insights of contemporary scholars of violence, I investigate violence simultaneously as a material reality, which is experienced by North Americans and embedded in economic and social contexts, and as a discursive practice, which comprises a complex group of cultural discourses constructing the experience of these realities.³⁴

Violence's discursive impact travels in two directions. As pioneering violence scholar Neil Whitehead noted, violent practices are "deeply infused with cultural meaning and are the moment for individual agency within historical embedded patterns of behavior."³⁵ From a public lynching to an exploded bank, from a labour riot to a war movie, from rocks thrown at a car speeding toward the town line to a joke about a murdered cheater, violence has always been a medium of communication – as tangible as a radio and as ephemeral and sinuous as the music the speakers pump into the air. It is time to turn up the volume and take a closer listen. But we must do so with an appreciation for the silences in the record. As anthropologist David Graeber and others have noted, violence often shuts down those with perspectives opposed to or dangerous to those with the power to wield violence.³⁶ Pat Cunningham was one of the first women to work in a Windsor Chrysler plant during the 1970s. Reflecting on the harassment and intimidation to which she was subjected by co-workers, she recalled, "It took me a long time to find my voice in the plant."³⁷ Violence silences as much as it amplifies.

Even when violence is used to communicate, it is often a brutalist form of communication deployed when the hierarchical gap between actors inhibits understanding or empathy. In Detroit Chrysler plants, for example, the structural violence of how auto work was organized created major disparities in everyday experiences and perspectives between management, union leaders, and autoworkers. The first two groups were insulated from

the hardships and struggles of life on the line. They experienced the conflicts of the plant from bureaucratic standpoints. Bureaucracy, such as the grievance meetings and personnel reports that attempted to regulate conflict at Chrysler in the 1960s, obfuscates ongoing violent processes, enabling the operations of power, even if ultimately dependent on violence, to continue with the appearance of legitimacy and order.³⁸ Thus, as explored in Chapter 4, unionists and management were baffled by the often violent everyday rebellions of autoworkers, unable to see how structural violence was producing individual violence. They focused on fears of crime and black militants while ignoring how the labour process in the plants was encouraging drug use, violence, and radical political responses. The disparities between management, union leaders, and workers were less pronounced in Windsor, contributing to those plants' greater stability.

By now, it should be clear that defining violence at work is no simple task. Because violence is a culturally constructed phenomenon, the definition of violence is subject to historical change. Autoworkers in Detroit and Windsor attempted to disrupt the prevailing definitions of violence at work presented by Chrysler, the UAW, and society at large. They challenged what they saw as an artificial distinction between what was defined as "violence" and what was considered an "accident" or "just part of the job." They did so to draw attention to health and safety issues and in-plant racism as forms of structural violence faced by workers, as well as to argue for a connection between structural violence and individual violence. In his book *Violence*, cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek makes a similar argument. Žižek contends that in contemporary life, the focus on *subjective* violence, the interpersonal violence committed by individual actors, diverts our attention from systemic and symbolic violence, from the "often-catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems," and from the relationships of domination embedded in our language.³⁹ Since systemic violence shapes the contours of everyday life and since everyday life is the "normal" against which the shocking transgressions of subjective violence are measured, systemic violence is often, Žižek claims, "invisible ... But it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be 'irrational' explosions of subjective violence."⁴⁰

The radical Detroit factory newspaper *Eldon Wildcat* raised this critique four decades ago, under the headline "What Makes a Story 'NEWS'?" A worker was killed at the Mack Avenue Stamping Plant, his head crushed by an unsafe press, yet local newspapers and television stations did not cover the story. In contrast, when a fired worker lashed out by attacking his

foreman and two others with a wrench, this story did make the newspapers, at least those that, argued the *Wildcat*, “present the bosses’ view of life – a view that never examines WHY something happens – why a man is driven to kill another man or why workers are killed on the job.”⁴¹ Clearly, there is much at stake in what is and has been considered violence at work. Thus, rather than imposing a unitary definition of workplace violence on the automotive workplaces of the 1960s and 1970s, this book is more concerned with exploring how the very definition of violence at work has been a site of struggle. To this end, in the pages that follow we hear much from workers themselves. This approach highlights different views of what constituted workplace violence. It also centres workers’ perspectives, which have traditionally been ignored in discussions of this issue.

Instead of adopting a singular definition of workplace violence, I pay particular attention to the manifestations and intersections of three forms of violence: physical, structural, and rhetorical. The primary form of violence discussed here is physical, such as fights, assaults, and homicides. I employ this focus not because this form of violence was the most common or even necessarily the most important. However, much as scholars of crime historically pay close attention to murders, the visibility and impact of incidents of physical violence allow us to apprehend the larger dynamics of violence at work. Structural violence, which included the disparities in how the work was organized, who did what work, the hazards and risks they faced, and the limits on their chances of improving their situation, was the essential context of individual violence. Finally, rhetorical violence was an everyday element of work culture and power relations in these plants. When autoworker James Netter invoked James Johnson’s deadly example by threatening “an Eldon Axle incident” and when Windsor workers wrote that “if anyone does flip out he should know he’ll be among other friends – autoworkers,” they showed they knew structural and individual violence shaped their workplace, their work, and power relations in the plant.⁴² By looking at these forms of violence in relation to each other, we can see the crucial links between the individual violence often thought of as emanating from an individual’s psyche and the structures in which that individual worked. Although violence’s impacts were complex and often contradictory, violence was undeniably constitutive of workplace processes and culture, not just something that resulted from them. It was a feature, not a bug; an integral part of 1960s and ’70s autowork, not a strange aberration. Overall, despite the hopes of some radical workers that individual violence could be used to help unseat Chrysler’s dominance of their working lives, violence

was much more effective at maintaining existing power dynamics in the plants than it was in overturning them.

Violence is a complex force that is often used to silence people, ideas, and perspectives. This circumstance makes it challenging to study. In researching and writing this book, I was fortunate to have access to many voices from auto plants, especially those of workers and unionists. Beyond its historical significance, the automotive industry has likely been such a frequent site of investigation by historians because of the rich documentation available, particularly union records. I was always aware, however, of the countless silences and untold stories from these plants. This study has benefited significantly from that documentation, but it has also drawn on a variety of other sources to obtain the clearest possible view on a subject that is often obscured in the shadows.

The documentary records of UAW locals at Chrysler in Detroit and Windsor held in the archives of the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs in Detroit were a major source of data, particularly union newspapers, material produced by and about radical groups like DRUM, interunion or UAW-Chrysler correspondence, meeting records, and grievance records. The Reuther Library holds the grievance records of UAW Local 3, the union representing workers at Dodge Main and its associated Huber Foundry, for the period 1950–75. These records were indispensable in crafting a picture of violent incidents as they were reported at the time. Using them allowed me to track the rise and fall in the levels of reported interpersonal violence in these workplaces over a twenty-five-year period, as well as violence's changing forms. However, these sources also contain challenges for the historian. I am certain that many, many incidents of violence at work were never reported or discovered and thus never made it anywhere near the grievance records. Grievance records are a discourse about workers that reflects a contested, adversarial process in which what actually happened, and why it happened, was sometimes in dispute. The records obscure or omit some important contextual information, especially the race or ethnicity of the parties involved in a violence grievance. Often, the grievance records leave out the ultimate outcome of the grievance, whether the worker was fired or returned to work, or what other disciplinary measures were employed. Therefore, I have combined my reading of these documents with oral interviews and contemporary writings on plant conditions, especially those collected in the Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection and secondary sources. Although the Reuther Library does contain much of value about Windsor Chrysler plants and Local 444,

which was the UAW Canada (later CAW and now Unifor) union for Windsor Chrysler workers, it does not hold a store of grievance records for these plants, making a paired empirical study of violence grievances between Local 444 and Local 3 impossible. However, this turned out to be a blessing, as the different tack of my research on violence in Windsor drew out valuable dimensions of the history of violence at work, dimensions not easily grasped through grievance records. Unifor Local 444 granted me access to a significant collection of local union files that are not currently available to historians. The rich store of union newspapers, in-plant bulletins, election materials, and leaflets produced by competing unions' political factions provided an illuminating perspective on the levels and understandings of violence in Windsor plants during the era. The oral interviews I was granted by former Windsor Chrysler workers were invaluable in revealing how workplace violence was understood and the role of violence in workplace culture. I also interviewed select Detroit activists, Canadian unionists, and legal professionals from both sides of the border to better understand crucial figures, events, and dynamics.

In the chapters that follow, I explore the ways that violence shaped every single day of auto work in Detroit and Windsor between 1960 and 1980. Chapter 2, "Fights and Knifings Are Becoming Quite Commonplace: Dodge Main, 1965–80," introduces us to Chrysler's flagship plant in Detroit. It shows how violence worked in the plant and discusses how Chrysler and the UAW undercut traditions of workers' control that had been the bedrock of workers' insider status. In Detroit plants, an intensified labour process, UAW-Chrysler conflict, racism, and national and local factors combined to produce the dangerous levels of violence in the late 1960s and early 1970s that attracted the attention of national observers, including *Newsweek* and the *New York Times*. This chapter also demonstrates that many workers understood individual violence as a legitimate response to brutal working conditions and racism.

Chapter 3, "The Way Boys and Men Took Care of Business: Windsor Chrysler Plants," investigates violence in Windsor plants. These plants experienced lower levels of individual and structural violence than their Detroit counterparts. However, they were also shaped by class conflict, violence, racism, and patriarchy. This chapter investigates how local and national contexts in Windsor created a somewhat safer workplace and thus demonstrates the important role of these contexts in influencing the relative levels of workplace violence in Detroit and Windsor Chrysler plants.

Nevertheless, violence played a significant role in workplace culture at Windsor Chrysler plants, especially as part of the hypermasculine tenor of the era's almost all-male plants. In Windsor insider violence was often used to enhance workers' masculine identity. Workers also used violence to regulate the conduct of co-workers and bosses.

The next chapter, "The Constant Companion of All That Earn Their Living Here: Workers, Unions, and Management Respond," outlines how Chrysler and the UAW responded to violent incidents in ways that failed to reduce or seriously challenge violence. Therefore, violence was a significant influence on the culture and politics of the plants. This chapter draws out the ongoing effects of workplace violence on the consciousness and strategies of workers, radicals, Chrysler management, and UAW leaders. What did these actors think about violence? Why did they think it was happening? What various definitions of workplace violence did they put forward? What remedies did they propose to reduce the risk of violence in their workplaces? Answering these questions reveals how crucial violence was in constructing how stakeholders understood their workplace, the challenges they faced, and the strategies they could pursue. Here, we see that violence, far from being an occasional eruption, was a constant element that shaped workplace dynamics on an ongoing basis.

Chapter 5, "Chrysler Pulled the Trigger: The Courts and the Press," shifts the focus to the world outside the factory by highlighting three shooting cases in the auto industry of the 1970s: James Johnson's murders at Detroit's Eldon Axle Plant in 1970; the 1974 shooting of UAW dissident Billy Harrell by UAW official David Mundy in Dearborn, Michigan; and the murder of beloved Windsor UAW Local 444 president Charlie Brooks by fired worker Clarence Talbot. These case studies historicize how wider understandings of workplace violence – what it meant, why it happened, and who was to blame – were contested in the public sphere. I analyze the competing visions of how to understand these events that were presented by the media, the public, prosecutors, and radical lawyers: were they brutal individual transgressions or the logical outgrowth of job stress, violence, union conflict, and racism in the plants?

Chapter 6, "Out of the Back Streets and into the Workplace: The Discovery of Workplace Violence in the 1980s and 1990s," extends this investigation of how understandings and definitions of workplace violence have been historically constructed. In this final chapter, I explore how the phenomenon of workplace violence as a discrete social problem was created