

From Lordstown to Vietnam and Back

David North
7 March 2019

In the early 1970s, the Lordstown plant was the center of militant struggles. A large portion of its work force consisted of young workers who had been radicalized by the mass civil rights struggles and the war in Vietnam. Many were Vietnam war veterans, and their experiences profoundly affected their view of American society.

Something of the mood of the time found expression in an interview with a 23 year old Lordstown worker, published in the February 12, 1973 issue of the Bulletin, which was then the weekly organ of the Workers League (forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party). The interview was conducted by David North.

“It’s not that I planned to be or want to be a radical, but it’s just that I’m dead against everything General Motors is for.”

Less than an hour earlier, Bob’s shift in the massive Lordstown GM assembly plant has ended; and now he sat in a tavern called the Pink Elephant, describing his feelings about the plant which he, along with several thousand other young workers, shut down last year for three weeks.

“Nothing has improved in the plant,” he said. “The management still treats us like machines. They don’t seem to think we even have feelings. Nothing matters to them except production, so they run the line faster and faster.

“I’ve got to admit it. Working here is the biggest blow to my morale. It’s changed my opinions about quite a few things.”

It has been five years since Bob, 23 years old, first went to work in the Lordstown plant. In between, he spent two years in the Marines, returning to work from Vietnam just a few weeks before the strike.

“You know, the Vietnam War made me very bitter. I guess that being over there really shook me up. When I came out of boot camp, I was about the most patriotic character you’d ever want to meet. I was really down

on anybody trying to criticize this country. I probably would have given you some trouble.

“But after one month in Vietnam, I started to feel differently. I’ll tell you one thing: we weren’t the good guys over there. Back home you read all about the Vietcong atrocities. Well, you should’ve just watched the American army in action, cutting heads off and what not.

“Man, in Vietnam one cannot even think like a human being. Everyone is supposed to turn sadistic. It’s hard to describe. I never felt so hated in my entire life. Even the kids hated us and I don’t blame them. After all, we tore up their villages.

“The only people who seemed happy to have us there were the rich Vietnamese and maybe some prostitutes desperate for money. Vietnam affected me. My buddies were getting shot up and then there’d be all these dead Vietnamese people lying on the road for the villagers to bury. For months I just kept wondering why everyone had to die.

“Another thing that really upset me was Kent State. I used to hang out there quite a bit with the ratio of women to men there being four to one. Then, while I’m in the Marines, I heard about the four students getting killed by the National Guard. My fiancée knows a friend of one of the girls who was shot. She wasn’t even protesting, just walking around. Then she caught a bullet in her head.

“I was upset. Being in the Marines, I know something about the equipment the military has to take care of demonstrations. Why, they’ve invented a nausea gas which could have everyone puking their guts out. But they just went ahead with bullets.

“Well, after getting out of the Marines I came back to work in Lordstown. That’s really been an experience. If I start describing conditions, I might not be able to stop.

“Like today, I hit my head while on the line and

everything started spinning. I wanted to go to the hospital so I called our committeeman. In the meantime, I missed a couple of jobs. When the committeemen finally arrived, all he thought about was the jobs I'd missed.

"Or take the paint department. In the summer, the temperature sometimes went over 100 degrees because no one bothered to repair the ventilation system after it broke down.

"Let me tell you something else. I wanted to go to the bathroom, but I couldn't get the foreman over to the line to replace me. You see, they hadn't repaired the horn which is used to get his attention.

"Here's something else that burned me. A man was promised to be released early one day. Then, at the last moment, the company forced him to stay in the plant because the foreman said there weren't enough men in the plant. But why the hell do they lay men off if that's the case?

"You put all these things together and you realize that GM is trying to break you down. They do it in so many different ways. I know a girl who wrote a college report on how GM is polluting Cedar Lake turning the whole thing into a stinking swamp. It turns out that her father works with GM, and the company threatened to fire him if the report gets around. That's how GM works.

"The way things are, I'm ready to strike and so are most men in the plant. But a lot of us don't think that the UAW really wants to back us when we fight. Now, I've always been able to take care of myself and because I can't count on the union, I'll usually settle the grievance on my own. But some things you can't fight by yourself.

"This guy Godfrey (the director of GMAD) is out to break us. But there's going to be a fight if he keeps pushing the men.

"I think I know what you mean when you talk about organizing labor against Nixon in a real fight. It's not too hard to see that GM works hand-in-hand with the government. Nixon lets the company get away with price increases, but our wages are frozen.

"I didn't vote for McGovern or Nixon. I just couldn't see how those men could be for anything that I'm for. They're with GM. I would be for a labor party because that seems to be something I could identify with. But I am sure that I don't belong with either the Democrats or Republicans."



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