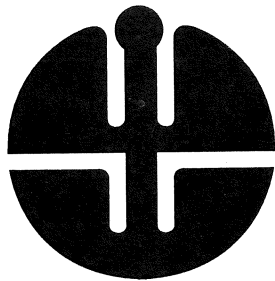


**WOMEN AT WORK :  
A STUDY OF MIGRANT WOMEN  
IN A MELBOURNE  
AUTO-PARTS FACTORY**

by  
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## PREFACE

This book is based upon an original Masters thesis submitted in 1993 to the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Monash University in Australia. It is being published in response to the current significance of the topic of migrant workers internationally. More particularly, it focuses upon female migrant workers who now predominate numerically in international labour migration. Today, Indonesia faces many obstacles in terms of the rising numbers of Indonesians working illegally in neighbouring countries, notably in Malaysia.

Like Indonesia, many countries are encountering complex challenges because of the acceleration of the international movement of workers. This book explores the complex dynamics of the industrial and personal experiences of female migrants in a specific case. Dr. Maunati's research investigates the position of women factory workers in one industrial location in Australia. Her research pioneered the investigation by a foreign (Indonesian) researcher of these sensitive issues. Her work brings to light aspects of the workers' experiences that are important in understanding the challenges that arise in the typical cross-national, cross-cultural workplaces that are now found throughout the Asia-Pacific and beyond. Her insights into these womens' experiences in Australia and the exposition of their clearly observable systemic subordination in the industrial labour market has general significance. It certainly contributes to our understanding of the situation of Indonesian migrant workers in general, and women workers in particular. Dr. Maunati's sensitive and painstaking work advances our broader understanding of international labour migration at a time when these issues are of great interest to scholars and policy-makers alike.

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## ABSTRACT

I have investigated the situation of women factory workers in Indonesia. Here, I am looking at factory in Australia in order to broaden my understanding of gender relations at the industrial labour market. The systemic subordination of women in the industrial labour market through fairly consistent patterns of domination can be observed across many otherwise sharply demarcated boundaries of nationality and culture. These patterns are most frequently found in the labour-intensive sectors of industry, and, regardless of the presence or absence of unions, exist in both industrialised and industrialising countries. The bargaining power of unskilled labour in industrialised countries like Australia can be undermined, as in recent times, by a combination between a slump in the economy of industrialised countries and the willingness of the abundant labour force in industrialising countries to do the same job for much lower wages.

Gender and ethnicity, two characteristics that migrant women embody, recur among these patterns of domination as socio-cultural bases whose roots lie in society at large, yet whose existence contributes powerfully to highly effective strategies of labour control in the workplace. Through a dynamic interplay between the forces of patriarchy and capitalist relations of production, migrant women have been manipulated into acceptance of regimes of control which the organised work-force of earlier decades would have contested.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Auto-Assembly
Ad	Administration
AS	Afternoon Shift
BL	Blow-Moulding
D	Despatch
DEET	The Department of Employment, Education and Training
En	Engineering
ER	Employee Relations
I.	Indonesian - is a word in Bahasa Indonesia, the national language.
I1&2	Injection Shops 1&2
I3	Injection Shop 3
Mt	Maintenance
MTFU	Metal Trades Federation Union
NES	Non-English-speaking
NIDL	New International Division of Labour
NS	Night Shift
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PD	Paint & Decoration
PI	Planning
QC	Quality Control
RSI	Repetitive Strain Injury
SPSI	Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia - the name of the main Indonesian labour organisation
WS	'Work in Progress' Store





## GLOSSARY

Galoma	is an Italian word meaning a horse
Harian Lepas	a casual daily (Indonesian)
Ibass	is a Russian word meaning sex
Kekeluargaan	Family (I.)
Kontrak	contract (I.)
Kulva	is a Russian word meaning naughty
Musiman	seasonal (I.)
Percobaan	probationary (I.)
Ramadan	is a month during which Moslems fast (I.)
Unit Kerja	Local unit of SPSI (I.)



## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

### A. BACKGROUND TO THE TOPIC AREA

My empirical research is concerned with migrant women's wage labour in the Australian manufacturing industry. In order to analyse the situation of these migrant women, it is not sufficient to restrict our discussion to the issue of women's subordination in capitalist society. Cross analysis involving class, gender, and race is essential in understanding the social relations of work since one cannot separate their simultaneous triple attributes for working women in industry: as members of working class, women and as migrants.

The origin of women's oppression under capitalism is still debatable. Social scientists often argue that patriarchy and capitalism are the main sources of women's oppression. Capitalism enables us to understand economic exploitation that is suffered by both men and women, while patriarchy addresses the question of men's domination over women. The problems of gender relations are a complex element in which one still has to remember that there are differences in women's experiences of oppression under capitalism. In the United States, black women's experiences are not identical to those of white women, indeed black women may be said to experience the triple exploitation of class, race and gender. Similarly, in Australia migrant women from non-English-speaking backgrounds have different experiences from the Anglo-Saxon women. In Australia, Collins (1981) reported that there are six segments which are partly characterised by race and gender. Migrant women from non-English-speaking countries, such as Greece, Italy, Malta, Yugoslavia, or Turkey are segmented into a low status within the labour market, only one step ahead of the Aboriginal group. Meanwhile, females born in Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, USA, Canada and northern Europe are in an higher segment than those listed. In the labour market they generally have a different type of work (see Collins, 1981). Migrant women experienced more oppression than Anglo-Saxon women. Political, cultural and historical matters may be significant factors in affecting such differences.

Western European countries, as well as Australia, witnessed a need for a new source of labour in order to develop the industries during the 'long boom' period of the fifties and the sixties (see Probert, 1989). Migrants<sup>1</sup> became an indispensable source of labour in expanding

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<sup>1</sup> International migration which has involved people from less developed countries (including, Italy, Greece, Malta, and Yugoslavia) to more developed ones like Australia,

industries. Migrant women, although arguably only as an exploitable labour source, have employment opportunities in manufacturing industries. Today, in analysing the position of women in Australian manufacturing industries, one also needs to link the evaluation of their situation with the globalisation of capitalism. In other words, we cannot understand migrant women's wage labour in Australian manufacturing industries adequately without looking at the development of these industries globally. The intensifying international competition that is partly due to the high (and increasing) mobility of capital internationally, may affect the bargaining power of labour (including that of migrant women). Those who work in the manufacturing industries in 'advanced' capitalist countries, like Australia, are by no means exempt from such trends.

The issue of migrant women's exploitation in the labour market is a central point since it allows an understanding of the process of the subordination of migrant women at work in capitalist society through the manipulation of their attributes. During the post-war period, the fifties and sixties, migrant women who migrated to Australia were usually dependents. In this respect, they were either wives, daughters, sisters, mothers of male migrants (see Martin, 1986:234). The reasons for migration varied, but these were mostly related to their status as dependents. Martin (1986:234) draws on Latin American Women's reason to migrate, saying:

*the priests told us that all Australian men were homosexual - the Australian disease they called it. They implored us to go and save our men, to bear their children and keep our people going ... we would be repaid in wealth and comfort (1986:234).*

Moreover, a woman's wage was often presumed to be a supplementary one due to their family responsibilities. However, in the case of migrant women, they often had to work out of sheer economic necessity. They usually were married to working class men. They worked for their family's survival. The problem is that migrant women are often 'invisible'. Indeed, it has been said that the discussion of migrants' problems are sex-blind because migrant women are assumed to have similar experiences to their men (see Pettman, 1992). This disadvantages migrant women at work because their problems are directly concealed, or simply not inquired into.

Some studies have highlighted some of the basic problems faced by migrant women in the workforce. Migrant women workers have largely been incorporated into the manufacturing industries where their positions

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has increased since the post-war period (see Cohen, 1987; Probert, 1989).

are usually at the bottom of the factories' shopfloors (see Collins, 1984). Collins (1978) argues that migrant women, especially those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, are segmented into 'secondary jobs' which are insecure, featuring lack of promotion opportunities and low wages. Lever-Tracy and Quinlan (1988) raise the issue of job security and point out that insecurity is not limited to 'secondary jobs'. In addition, in order to understand migrant women it is not enough to just refer to the issue of their marginalisation. The process of marginalisation is complex. The lack of English skills and qualifications are only part of the sources of their marginalisation. The basic problems of migrant women's work in Australian manufacturing industries need to be explored further. What is left unexplained is how migrant women view the social relations at work and how they view themselves.

## B. THE PURPOSES OF THE STUDY

I am specifically concerned with migrant women's wage labour in Australia. The aims of this study are to contribute to the understanding of migrant women's working experiences and the understanding of their own conceptions of their situation. This thesis not only aims to add to the existent body of knowledge on migrant women workers in manufacturing industry; it also seeks to argue that their experience is significantly affected by a dynamic interplay between the forces of patriarchy and capitalist relations of production. The more specific questions I will address are - what are the dynamics of labour control and what strategies do the workers adopt to survive; what is the role of the union and how is this role perceived by the workers; and what are the workers prospects and how do they perceive their current work?

There is nothing static or fixed about labour control in the industrial labour market. The type of labour control is subject to change. The transformation of work is normally followed by an alteration in the types of control, which may be more rigid. For example, technological change enabled management to improve their control by introducing assembly line work. The organisation of work is also subject to change. It is improved to meet the need of particular times and circumstances. Labour control is always of fundamental importance for management so that it is not surprising if management constantly seeks new and better modes of control to serve their own interests.

History has shown that labour is not always passive. Trade unions were established to obtain workers' rights, particularly in terms of wages and working conditions. Obviously, unions have more power than the individual worker since unions have a wider range of bargaining weapons (see Burkitt and Bowers, 1979:2-3). The objective of union is to protect its workers. However, the union's power may be less than the power of

employers due to the employers' hold over the mean of production. Indeed, unions themselves have their own interests so that labour's interests may not always be fulfilled entirely. The issue of workers' attitudes towards unions is fundamental, since it shows the gap between the union and the workers.

The workers' viewpoint on his/her current job is affected by many factors. For example, the size and financial strength of the company can be a significant factor, since the stronger it is, the greater the workers' sense of security is likely to be. Moreover, the social relations at work may also be another important factor influencing the workers' attitudes to their work.

### C. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Collecting valid data is always a considerable problem for the researcher. In order to mitigate the shortcomings of survey data, participant observation can be used to probe issues at greater depth, and most significantly, where interpretative problems (such as determining workers' perceptions) are concerned, as a bias for qualitative research judgements.

In this study, I proposed to use this method. Similarly, Chinoy (1955) and Daud (1985) have employed this method. In this instance, Chinoy was working in the Automobile factory, Daud was working in MKF (a Minah Karan' Factory in Malaysia). Both Chinoy and Daud informed the management about their research. In my planning, I also resolved to work in the factory, as an ordinary worker<sup>2</sup> alongside migrant women. However, I was initially unable to simply join the workforce through the usual avenues because of the difficulties of finding a job in the economic recession. My first attempt was to approach job centres, particularly in the areas where many factories are located, such as Springvale, Oakleigh and Brunswick in Melbourne. Sometimes, there were vacancies in the factories, but the factories always required young people (15-16 years old), experienced people<sup>3</sup>, and English fluency. Due to these requirements, I was excluded from applying for the job. Based on my experience, it can be assumed that migrant women from non-English-speaking countries, those who have just arrived, or are older than the usual requirement, will undergo a similar experience to mine. Furthermore, I experienced 'sexual

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<sup>2</sup> What I mean by 'ordinary worker' is someone who can be a paid worker in the factory exactly like the factory's workers.

<sup>3</sup> Some factories required young ones, between 15 and 16 years old. In this respect, the factories often did not require experience. Other factories required experienced people. For instance, if someone wanted to apply for the job he or she must previously have worked in a similar factory in Australia. Overseas experience was usually not accepted.

harassment<sup>4</sup> on the way to find a job centre and the Economical Migration Centre. Migrant women might experience similar things if they have no one to help them. Secondly, I went to many factories door to door, asking whether there was a job vacancy in the factory or not. In order to use this second method, I sacrificed my self-esteem since I often experienced cynical responses from the factories' officers every time I was asking for a job. Thirdly, I sent some letters to many factories. Fourthly, I read the Wednesday and Saturday newspapers (*The Age*) to scan for job vacancies as well as seeking work through the Trades Hall and various ethnic associations. Fifthly, I tried to utilise my supervisor's network<sup>5</sup> and my own network<sup>6</sup>.

Finally, I found a factory which would allow me to do research thanks to a personal contact<sup>7</sup>. The management agreed to allow me to work in this company with certain prerequisites. They were: I should not come too early because in the morning the factory was very busy when the distribution of jobs was conducted; I can work only as a volunteer; I cannot disturb the workers while I do my interviews so that their targets of production would not be affected.

At the beginning of my interview, I always introduced myself and told every worker about my aim of doing research there<sup>8</sup>. Unlike what I did, Daud (1985:134) in her study concealed her identity as a Ph.D student, in order to obtain co-operation from the workers. She was told by the Personnel Manager of MKF that workers did not like 'higher institution' students. Although I disclosed my identity as a student from Monash University, I was still able to win the co-operation of workers. The strategy I used at the beginning of the research was to interview all workers while they were working, one by one, for a short time. Initially, I only

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<sup>4</sup> I went to Fitzroy to find the job centre and Economical Migration Centre to get some references. I walked along Nicholson Street, I asked a middle aged man the way to the Economical Migration Centre. He, then, asked me, "Do you want to work?". I spontaneously answered "yes". He told me that his wife has a clothing factory. He promised to give me a job in his wife's factory or his Greek friends who own small firms. He asked me to go to a coffee shop to have a talk about the job. We went to the coffee shop and ordered two cups of cappuccino. He talked a lot about the job and I could choose which one I would like. Later on, he talked about his Chinese girl friend whom he helped to find a job when she just arrived. He finally expected me to be his girl friend if I wanted the job. He touched my hand. I warned him off and I told him honestly that I am a student trying to find a job for fieldwork. Then I left.

<sup>5</sup> Those who have a good contact with factories.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, I contacted Indonesian permanent residents who worked in factories.

<sup>7</sup> I was accepted to conduct my fieldwork in this factory because I knew someone who is the relative of one of the shareholders who is also a member of the board of management.

<sup>8</sup> This way was required by the university because of the guidelines set by the research Ethics Committee.

concentrated on establishing a general impression, such as the workers' characteristics, their reasons for working, and their viewpoint on the union. I took notes in the interviews for approximately one month. Later on, I stopped writing directly in front of workers once the workers complained about it. Lolo, Julia, and among others said "Please, don't write my story". I realised that I had not been accepted as a co-worker since there was a distance between us. They thought that I did not work as hard as them because I took notes every time they said something important to my research. I changed my strategy. I worked as hard as them and I did not hold a notebook any more, rather I hid it inside my pocket. In order to be able to write the information as soon as possible, I used several methods. I often wrote notes in the factory's toilet so that the workers did not see what I was doing. I also took notes in my car before leaving the factory and typed the information as soon as I arrived home. To help my memory, every week I concentrated on one topic. For example, I focussed only on the workers' viewpoint on the union during the first week of April 1991, while in the second week of April 1991, I concentrated on the workers' viewpoint on the current work.

After two months working in this factory, I found that the workers had already accepted me. They did not mind telling me about their viewpoints on work and its relation to other aspects, although they did not like it if I took notes on what they were saying to me. I developed the strategy of chatting in a friendly way while I was working alongside them without showing my own aim to get information.

By being able to work inside the factory, I had particular advantages. I was able to observe the work conditions and to understand the social relations in the factory. As a person who was, at the beginning, introduced by management to the workers, I worried about the possibility of any feeling of fear and suspicion of me by the workers. However, I was accepted once I also worked hard and they became accustomed to my presence.

#### D. ORGANISATION OF THIS THESIS

Subsequent chapters of the thesis are organised around the following concerns. Chapter I is the introduction, which basically deals with the background to the topic, purpose of study, methodology, and organisation of this thesis itself. Chapter II, headed, 'Understanding Migrant Women's Work in Australia', deals with theoretical considerations. It reviews the most relevant literature leading to the question of migrant women's position in the labour market. It firstly discusses the issue of patriarchy since it draws our attention to the systemic subordination of women in work and in society. However, patriarchy alone as an ideological basis is inadequate to explain women's subordination in the labour market.



Capitalism is also an important source of this subordination. Finally, it discusses the characteristics of migrant women's work in Australia. The empirical research is discussed in chapter III, IV, V and VI. Chapter III, 'Women Workers in the Auto-Parts Factory', outlines workers' characteristics. Unlike the common characteristics of female factory workers in the 'developing' countries who are young, single, and only work for short periods of time, the majority of the workers in the 'Bravo'<sup>9</sup> factory are married, over forty years old and most have been working for more than 15 years. The low turnover of labour among them could be affected by particular union practices of 'last person employed, first fired' as well as the ties along ethnic and personal lines with the forelady and other workers. Whilst the differences are there, there are similarities between factory workers in the developing countries and in the 'Bravo' factory, particularly in terms of their backgrounds - rural-peasant backgrounds. Moreover, the concentration on the obedience of the workers seems likely to be an important factor in the selection of labour. Furthermore, this chapter covers the economic significance of work and the working conditions.

'The Union' which is the heading of chapter IV, deals with the purpose of union, its changing objectives and workers' views on it. Unionism in advanced countries is the norm and they have been instrumental in involving the state in many ways. Australia is one of the most highly unionised countries in the western industrialised world (see Cole, 1982:8; Whitehouse, 1990:365). Although it has been widely argued that unions are quite powerful, their actual strength has been questioned because it has been argued that employers are more powerful than unions due to their ownership of the means of production (Burkitt and Bowers, 1979:1). Moreover, the globalisation of production has had a significant effect on the power of Australian unions. For instance, promises of cheap labour power and weak unionisation has lured capital away from Australia. This has resulted in the loss of jobs and restriction of wage rises for Australian workers and has in turn reduced the bargaining power of unions.

In the 'Bravo' factory, the relationship between workers and the union was not in harmony as they often did not seem to share interests. The majority of the workers did not like the union. Moreover, union representatives on the shopfloor often failed to mediate. Actually, shop stewards shared the same feeling of alienation from the bureaucratically centralised union that was felt by the workers. Ineffective communication between workers and the union was the major problem in this instance. Another significant factor was related to the management's strategies in

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<sup>9</sup> 'Bravo' is the pseudonym for the factory, where I carried out my fieldwork.

enticing the workers to be on the management side as opposed to the union's side. Chapter V consists of a discussion of control mechanisms, patterns of relationships among workers, the promotion system, the sub-culture, job mobility and security. I classified four forms of control in this factory, namely interpersonal control, the system of work, bureaucratic control and the creation of fear. Interpersonal control, which was often argued not to be effective any more once the modern type of control developed, remained an effective way of control over labour in this factory. Basically, a combination of all forms of control have resulted in the workers' diligence and loyalty to the company. The relationships among the workers varied, ranging from harmonious relationships and covert competition to conflicting relationships. The harmonious relationships were, more often than not, derived from ethnic bonds. Issues of promotion did not become the important source of conflicting relationships. Only a few women experienced promotion within the factory hierarchy; most of the workers stayed in one position, that of unskilled process workers from year to year. Though they did not obtain promotion, they preferred staying in one job, preferring the feeling of security to the risks involved in moving to a different job.

An examination of management's strategies is in chapter VI. In order to understand the strategies of the factory and the impact of this on the workers, it is necessary to associate with management. From the management's perspective, the tasks of management are to select the type of products, to control production and the appropriate technology, as well as to create a productive, efficient and harmonious team (Saunders, 1973:viii).

It would be too ambitious to cover the whole range of management activities, so this section is restricted to aspects which are assumed to have a significant impact on the workers: that of the factory's structure, the human factor (that is personal variation), and the relationship between the 'Bravo' factory and the car companies.

Furthermore, to achieve the company's goals, management utilised the participative approach to deal with workers, featuring a paternalistic system of labour control in order to promote peaceful, accepting relationships. Management also controlled another area of struggle which is the labour process itself which, as Braverman (1974:58) notes, is essential in all capitalist firms. Furthermore, according to management the hardest task was to select the right person for particular positions within the hierarchy, such as manager, or supervisor, to find a person who could be expected to be responsible and successful, particularly in dealing with the human factor.

The human factor, then, will be the second issue to be discussed. Experience has shown that the human factor is the most difficult task for management to deal with. To reduce this difficulty, management has

promoted an approach which considers the workers' dignity and also pushes the idea of effective communication which in turn, could be expected to create a sense of understanding and loyalty.

Furthermore, being the supplier of the car companies, the factory has a certain degree of instability since much depends upon the success of the car market. Therefore, the discussion of the relationships between this factory and the car companies will be addressed in this section, as it has important implications for the job security of the workers.

Finally, overview and conclusion is discussed in chapter VII.



## CHAPTER II UNDERSTANDING MIGRANT WOMEN'S WORK IN AUSTRALIA

### A. INTRODUCTION

My empirical research in the factory is concerned with a number of problems that have been argued about in the theoretical literature. Among these problems are the connection between migrant women's subordination in society and the social relations of work that are associated with capitalist society. In other words, can we understand migrant women's oppression as a product of capitalism or does it go beyond that? I am specifically concerned with migrant women's wage labour in Australia. The more specific questions I will address are: what are the dynamics of labour control and what strategies do the workers adopt to survive?; what is the role of unions and how are they perceived by the workers?; what are the workers prospects and how do they perceive their current work? I believe the major elements in the discussion in the following are the enduring question of patriarchy; the argument about women's place in capitalist society; the discussion of the changing role of women workers in the contemporary global economy which is experiencing a new phase of industrial transformation; and the characteristics of migrant women's work in Australia.

The issue of patriarchy is the most fundamental since it draws our attention to the systematic subordination of women in work and in society through patterns of domination that extend across many national and cultural boundaries and persist through otherwise profound historical transformations, such as the emergence of industrial society. Feminist scholars differ, however, on the degree to which patriarchy is linked to particular socio-economic systems and cultures. Hartmann (1981) argues, for example, that patriarchy and capitalism are the main sources of women's oppression. Yet others, such as Curthoys (1988), question the usefulness of the concept itself. Others argue that women's subordination is not to be understood in universal terms since different women have radically different experiences and life chances, such as the differences pointed out by Walby (1989) between whites and non-whites.

However, while the lasting and most deeply entrenched roots of oppression based on gender must be explored, my study directly addresses a part of contemporary society where women's subordination appears clear, systemic and consistent across national and cultural boundaries: their predominant presence in a great many of the labour-intensive sectors of industry, both in industrialised and industrialising countries. The size and significance of the female industrial labour force is indisputable. What is more challenging is to arrive at a satisfactory theoretical analysis

that accounts for the near ubiquity of factories worked by low-wage female labour throughout the Asia-Pacific region. I am looking at a factory in Australia, and previously have investigated the situation of women factory workers in Indonesia. My research will show that the gap between 'Third World' low wages factory in less industrialised countries like Indonesia and an already industrialised country like Australia is not an absolute bifurcation. The differences are there, but there are also important similarities. One needs to consider several approaches to the analysis of women in the labour market. I talk about 'globalisation' and 'industrial transformation' because these words signify concepts which belong to an extensive literature; they gesture towards theoretical frameworks which attempt to show, amongst other things, why trends in labour relations are developing in their present direction. An important approach found in that literature is that of the New International Division of Labour (NIDL) which seeks to explore the position of women in the global economy, in particular the special place they have in the new labour-intensive industries in industrialising countries. The extent to which this is significant in explaining the position of female factory workers in the advanced countries is an important question. It could be argued that the ability of a factory in an advanced country to move their production to cheap labour markets in the Third World results in weakening the bargaining power of 'first-world' workers and undermines workers' rights in both places. It also advances an understanding of how the globalisation of economies has brought about the emergence of a new model of production in the advanced countries, such as is argued in the 'post-Fordist' scenario.

Controversy surrounds the assertion that industrial production has entered a post-Fordist stage. The optimists suggest that this stage has emerged unambiguously, and is accompanied by the development of new technologies, labour flexibility, multiskilled labour, decentralisation of decision-making, and team work (see Matthews, 1989:89). This view is challenged by others such as Sayer (1989), Clarke (1990), and Baldock (1991).

Whether or not it signals the end of 'Fordism' there do exist clear trends towards multiskilling in industrial workplaces (Ford, 1991). However, there is uncertainty regarding the nature of work that will be available to many categories of workers. The direction towards the post-Fordist stage is still debatable.

The pessimists suggest there has been a deterioration in the nature of jobs available, that the growth of sweatshops and outwork jobs are part of the manufacturing restructuring process in the advanced countries. Restructuring basically enables industries to become internationally competitive. Ford (1991) emphasises that Australia is opening up its economy to international competition.

Due to the intensifying international competition, there has been a transformation in the types of tasks available to labour. Some now require multiskilling whilst others are becoming deskilled. The transformation of jobs in the industrial sector appears in two distinct forms- multi-skilled jobs and low-skilled jobs. Wood points out that:

*.....while restructuring may mean more flexible and demanding work for men it may imply something quite different for women - more intensification, deskilling and control (1989:5).*

De-regulation in most of the major economies of the Asia-Pacific combined with the re-organisation of large enterprises on a global scale has set up powerful moves towards the internationalisation of labour markets, even if labour itself is not completely mobile. This transformation results in divergent prospects in 'national' labour markets for different groups of workers. Reich (1989) argues that the trend towards globalisation affects different groups in society in different ways, but the aggregate outcome is increased polarisation between rich and poor, with a loss of numbers in middle class groups.

In Australia, an increasingly uneven distribution of wealth among workers has also emerged (see Raskall, 1992:9; Ellingsen, 1992:1). Migrant women from non-English-speaking backgrounds should be included in the lower income group if the prolonged recession and high unemployment levels remain. The segmentation of labour markets can also illuminate the mechanisms which are currently depressing the conditions of the least skilled workers, and others who can be manipulated on non-economic grounds such as race and gender.

Migrant women have largely been absorbed by manufacturing industry. Their positions are usually in the lowest paid jobs on the shopfloors or assembly lines. I am interested in studying migrant women workers in a factory which has been restructured in order to compete internationally. All of the theories I have just mentioned raise arguments which promise to shed light on the changes which the women workers in this factory have experienced. I have some doubts about some of the claims made by these theories; doubts which can be argued abstractly, but which emerge most cogently from the evidence of my fieldwork. My research therefore not only needs to invoke these theories to account for the trends I have observed, but also brings into view aspects of the social dynamics of

industrial work which are not adequately explained by them. Demonstrating these claims will be the business of later empirical chapters. In the rest of this chapter, I want to explore these ideas in more detail, drawing attention to those concepts which are most pertinent to my study. I shall begin by discussing the concept of patriarchy in order to understand the roots of women's subordination.

## B. UNDERSTANDING PATRIARCHY.

Discussions of patriarchy are meaningful because they enable us to understand the position of women more clearly and within an historical context. Patriarchy has been in existence long before capitalism and may well provide a large part of the explanation of why women remain discriminated against under capitalism (see Hartmann, 1981; Tong, 1989). In other words, it is a theory which asks us to look beyond the workings of our present social system to discover the most obdurate roots of discrimination based on gender. The labour market cannot be interpreted without reference to patriarchy - the systemic dominance of men over women. Hartmann (1981:6-7) asserts that there is one central problem in the various institutions of the family, the labour market, economy, and ultimately in society itself. The dichotomy, she says, is not simply a division of labour between men and women, rather the problem is that such a division places men in a superior and women in a subordinate position.

Patriarchy is difficult to define and there have been different interpretations of it given by various scholars. For example, Weber (1947) used patriarchy to refer to a system of government where men controlled societies through their position as heads of households. However, Walby interpreted patriarchy as "a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby, 1989:214). The emphasis given to the term 'social structure' means that these arguments reject not only biological determinism, but also the idea that "every individual man is in a dominant position and every individual woman in a subordinate one" (Walby, 1989:214). Some experts argue that these concepts of patriarchy are inadequate to understand the complexity of modern society because they fail to account sufficiently for historical and cross-cultural variations of gender inequality, particularly ethnic differences between women as well as class (Barret, 1980). For example, white women have different experiences from coloured women in the labour market, which lead to differences in paid work. By extension the oppression experienced by white women and coloured women is different (Walby, 1989). Hartmann attempts to contribute to the debate with an explanation of how the concept of patriarchy deals with problems of difference. She defines patriarchy "as a set of social relations between men,



which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women" (1981:14). Hartmann seems to be suggesting that even though the position of men is unequal because they come from separate classes, races or ethnic groups, there is a mutual dependency among them which enables them to maintain domination over women. In patriarchal societies, all men, whatever their rank, are in a superior position (vis-a-vis women), by being able to control at least some women (Hartmann, 1981:14-15).

The elimination of women from access to some essential resources and the restriction of women's sexuality are two key ways in which men attempt to control the position of women (Hartmann, 1981:15)<sup>10</sup>. According to her argument, the material base of patriarchy leads on to a generalised male control of female labour power.

Walby, who also includes the material base in her argument, illustrates a new way of theorising about patriarchy in order to mitigate the weaknesses of the previous definitions by involving a wider range of life experiences. In her theory, patriarchy is composed of six main structures which together make up a system of patriarchy. These are:

*a patriarchal mode of production in which women's labour is expropriated by their husbands; patriarchal relations within waged labour; the patriarchal state; male violence; patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal culture (Walby, 1989:220).*

This theory of patriarchy seems to encompass almost the whole of life. Moreover, theories of this kind leave little scope for social and cultural change. A satisfactory theory of patriarchy would need to identify the types of change which promise to diminish patriarchal domination. It also needs to consider the amelioration of patriarchy which can emerge as an unintended consequence of broader social change. For example, Walby's statement that husbands take over women's labour seems incongruous in the current situation where many women are incorporated into the labour market, even in supervisory positions. The concepts of patriarchy therefore cannot be determined rigidly. There are some, such as Curthoys (1988:70), who even go so far as to question the use of patriarchy as an explanatory concept. She argues that there are fundamental problems inherent in the attempt to define and use the concept 'patriarchy' in this way. Ultimately, she claims, it is misleading; "it explain nothing; it helps us to change nothing". Curthoys says:

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<sup>10</sup> In order to illustrate patriarchy, Hartmann uses the examples mainly from the experiences of whites in western capitalist countries.

*We need in particular to reconsider the idea of 'male dominance' or 'male supremacy' which the concept of patriarchy is meant to explain. That is, while there are many inequalities between men and women, and many ways in which men can control or exert power over women, I don't think that one can encapsulate all this as 'male supremacy'. Such a view treats all men as a group and all women as a group, and then says that all men have power over all women. I think it's all more complicated than that. Other power relationships and inequalities cut across sexual ones (1988:70).*

Individual women's experiences of patrimony and subjugation may vary. Tanner (1974:146) finds that in three ethnic groups in Indonesian societies (Javanese, Acehnese and Minangkabau) "women are producers and control economic resources". It was not in terms of economic relations that they were subjugated, but rather in terms of social and political matters.

However unsatisfactory the more extreme and simplistic theorisations of patriarchy may be, it still remains an inescapably important dimension of gender-based discrimination in work, in the household and in public life. It points powerfully to consistent patterns of gender discrimination that persist across historical, national and cultural boundaries, and across different types of society. While we need to identify the social and cultural conditions that sustain patriarchy - and therefore the conditions in which it might be transcended - and to improve the theory in various other ways, it stands as a clear warning that the exploitation of women's labour is a phenomenon that cannot be reduced to the imperatives of our present socio-economic system alone. On the other hand, women have too often been relegated to the lowest ranks of work in industrial capitalism for this system to be absolved from consideration as part of the complex web of discrimination many women fall victim to.

### C. WOMEN'S WORK UNDER CAPITALISM

There is a strong belief among feminist and Marxist scholars that women remain oppressed under capitalism (see Thomas, 1988:534). However, this does not mean that capitalism is the only cause of women's oppression because, as suggested earlier, this condition predates capitalism: patriarchy has existed longer than have capitalist modes of production. In the debate on the nature of women's oppression under capitalism Marxist theory is one of the main players. Feminists using Marxist theories explain why working-class women are oppressed differently from those of the higher classes (see Ramazanoglu, 1989:17). The issues discussed by feminists who are using Marxist theories vary, from private issues to public ones. I will restrict to the discussion of

women's wage labour under capitalism. Hartmann (1981:4) notes that Marx, Engels, Kautsky, and Lenin generally believed that capitalism would incorporate women into the wage labour market, and in this manner, the traditional sexual division of labour would be demolished. Women workers would fight alongside men in the fight against capitalism to create socialism. Hartmann claims that instead of analysing the position of women in their relationships with men, they concentrate on searching for the link between women and the economic system. Hartmann's thesis is that capitalism has developed a partnership with patriarchy; therefore in order to analyse the position of women under capitalism it is necessary to consider both the relationships - men to women and women to the economic system. In addition, dual-system theorists (including Mitchell and Hartmann), basically suggest that "patriarchy and capitalism are distinct forms of social relation and distinct sets of interest, which, when they intersect, oppress women in particularly egregious ways" (Tong, 1989:175).

Whilst under capitalism the issue of inequality between the sexes remains, socialism has not necessarily provided a better alternative. Tong (1989:174) reported that in socialist as well as capitalist countries women remain in the grip of patriarchy. In addition to an understanding of both patriarchy and economic relations, we need to understand cultural factors which affect women's position and other aspects of their lives.

Women's work in capitalism cannot be analysed by a myopic interpretation which argues that capitalism is the main reason for discrimination against women. Other theories which claim that capitalism also directly or indirectly gives advantages to women seem to have been ignored, such as the process of decision-making in the family<sup>11</sup>. Although women are exploited within the labour market there may be compensating advantages for them within the system.

Since my research has taken up the problem of the position of women's work under capitalism, I intend, through the exposition of my material to demonstrate the complexity, and some of the troubling ambiguities, of the pressures women workers face. By doing so, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of their lives. In the following sub-sections I will discuss dual system theory and reserve army of labour.

### (i) Dual System Theory

There exists an influential body of literature on women's position under capitalism that has been written from a Marxist perspective. As I mentioned before, I am specifically concerned with the women's wage labour so I will restrict myself to the discussion of related issues.

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<sup>11</sup> For a range of the debate of whether capitalism is beneficial for women or not see Thomas (1988).

Marx, Engels, Kautsky, and Lenin believed that women and men would become equal when all women were incorporated into the labour market despite the fact that women would have a dual role of houseworker and wage worker. Following this incorporation, men and women would fight together against capitalism in order to create socialism. Engels (1972) pinpointed the fact that women were located in a subordinated position vis-a-vis men and he linked this to the institution of private property. Furthermore, he sought to understand their subordination, both ideological and otherwise, through an examination of the materialistic process through history (Sayers, *et al.* 1987:1).

Although Engels' work has stimulated much debate from the nineteenth century to the present day<sup>12</sup>, it has been and continues to be somewhat problematic. For example, a woman's contribution to family income does not always lead to a position of equality with men due to the influence of religion and cultural factors. Historians have suggested that, although women in pre-industrial societies produced a substantial amount of the family income, their position in the social hierarchy remained inferior (Hartmann, 1979). Furthermore, they failed to focus on the differences between the actual experiences of men and women under capitalism, ignoring the fundamental feminist question of how and why women are oppressed as women (Hartmann, 1981). These theories cannot explain the subordination of women to men sufficiently because they ignore the existence of patriarchy and the complexity of women's position both in the workplace and society in general.

Tong (1989:174) notes that radical feminists as well as psychoanalytic feminists also provide gender analysis of women's subordination. Radical feminists claim that as long as every avenue of power is in male hands, women will be bound to the home or assigned to the lowest paid work. The problem which arose from both radical feminists and psychoanalytic feminists was that they often make universal claims. Dual system theory which was developed by socialist feminists, was proposed to overcome the limits of traditional Marxist feminism on the one hand, and of radical and psychoanalytic feminism on the other.

Iris Young (Tong, 1989: 175-176) uses Juliet Mitchell as an example of a dual system theorist who coupled a nonmaterialist account of patriarchy with a materialist account of capitalism<sup>13</sup>. Mitchell's idea was that no matter how much the mode of production changes, the biosocial (which was the result of the interaction between female biology and the social environment) and ideological aspects will remain alike. Therefore,

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<sup>12</sup> For a range of critiques of Engels viewpoint/thesis see Hartmann (1981) and Sayers, *et al.* (1987).

<sup>13</sup> Tong cites from Iris Young, 'Socialist Feminism and the Limits of Dual System Theory', *Socialist Review* 10, nos. 2-3 (March-June 1980): 174.

the ruin of capitalism has to be accompanied by the defeat of patriarchy. In similar vein, Vogel (1983) and Ramazanoglu (1989:15) both state that under socialism women continue to be subordinated. Although socialism could produce improved material conditions for women, clearly it did not produce women's liberation from men.

Another example of the dual system theorist was Heidi Hartmann: those who viewed patriarchy "as a structure of relations in society that has a very *material* base in men's historical control over women's labor power" (see Tong, 1989:179)<sup>14</sup>. Why are women subordinate to men both inside and outside the family, and why is it not the other way around? Hartmann emphasises that "Marxist categories, like capital itself, are sex-blind" (1981:10-11). Patriarchal relations remain strong after women have become economically independent (see Tong, 1989).

It is important to note that patriarchal relations relate to many social and cultural factors apart from the economy, and it is fallacious to believe that patriarchal relations will be destroyed simply because women are incorporated into the labour market. The fact is that women remain in an unequal position to men in the labour market across time. Hartmann (1979:215-217) quotes the case of the UK in which the later growth of factories led to the separation of the process of production from the home. The factory system broke down the former way of organising work, in both the domestic industry and the older guild system. Following the breaking down of these systems, women were faced with problems of unemployment and lack of income. Factory owners took advantage of women in this vulnerable position and employed them at lower wages than men. Women and children became a cheap labour source for capitalists as they established the factories. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, all members of the family - men, women, and children - were pushed out to work in factories. Once child labour was prohibited<sup>15</sup>, one of the parents was then required to stay home to look after the children. The alternative would have been to establish child-care centres to enable the mothers to take jobs but the (male) trade unions did not demand that employers provide work-based childcare centres. Thus at the beginning of the industrial revolution working-class women found jobs but were later forced out of the labour market.

In the contemporary situation where women have been incorporated in industrial manufacturing, there is strong evidence that capitalists do not treat men and women workers equally. In order to achieve maximum profit, capitalism creates a hierarchy in the labour structure, generally placing women at the bottom. Humphrey (1985) argues that the actual capitalist division of labour in large scale industry is related to the

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<sup>14</sup> See also the section of 'Understanding Patriarchy'.

<sup>15</sup> See Barret and McIntosh, 1982.

development of specialised technical and managerial functions, supervision, the establishment of specialised departments, such as tool rooms, maintenance, stores, quality control and production, and the creation of hierarchical ordering of skill within these departments. The sexual division of labour is integrated in the capitalist division of labour and pervades every component of it. Within it, women and men are allocated, by gender, to different functions and categories of work. The sexual segregation which occurs there generally has women occupying an inferior position to that of men. Game and Pringle (1983:15-16) believe that gender is constructed and reconstituted in the workplace. They argue that "the content of men's work and women's work is subject to change. ...If anything remains fixed, it is the *distinction* between men's work and women' work" (Game and Pringle, 1983:15).

Moreover, because of domestic responsibilities more women than men engage in part-time work, particularly as the majority of women bear the concurrent responsibility for housework. In order to analyse the nature of working women's oppression, we must recognise the existence of women's dual role<sup>16</sup>. Indeed, recently, Bone (1992:11) had observed that "women occupy three-quarters of all part-time jobs in Australia".

Capitalism has not developed similarly everywhere, and the experience of women under capitalism varies. For instance, the experience of women in some Third World countries under industrialisation is that large numbers of young and mostly unmarried women have been incorporated into the labour market (Mitter, 1986; Lin, 1982; Cho, 1985, Lim, 1984), and it is sometimes men who face the problem of unemployment. Moore (1988:114), in accord with Janet Salaff's study of the 'working daughters' of Hong Kong (Salaff, 1981), notes a different pattern again. However, these women do not have job security and yet they must work to survive. Mather (1982) found that many women workers in Indonesia were forced to become prostitutes after losing their factory jobs. They might also still be responsible for housework or engaged in other forms of work organised by capitalist relations of production.

Many scholars argue that there is a partnership between patriarchy and capital: women's oppression in capitalism is caused by both patriarchy and capital<sup>17</sup>. However, this does not mean that there is no conflict between patriarchy and capital. The fact is that men and capitalism often have conflicting interests, especially in the utilisation of women as wage labour. Perhaps the majority of men want their women to stay at home to

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<sup>16</sup> For a list of books on domestic labour and dual role debate see, Hartmann (1981) and Dalla Costa (1973). 'Women and the Subversion of the community', in Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Bristol, England: Falling Fall Press.

<sup>17</sup> c.f. Hartmann, 1981; Mitter, 1986, Tong, 1989, etc.

care for them; but a smaller number of men, as capitalists, might want most women (not their own) to work in the wage labour market. The fact that women can be paid less than men have made them attractive to this small group of 'capitalist' men. The vulnerability of the position of women, has become a tool for capitalists to achieve their interests<sup>18</sup>.

One needs to consider the uses that are made of gender difference within the dynamic practices of the labour process. Capitalists do not always employ men as labourers because the most important consideration for them is how to obtain optimum profits. In particular jobs women are, in fact, more exploitable than men - inferior wages can be paid without reducing the quality of the output. Women are paid less because of their primary identification as home makers, so that work outside the home is considered to be secondary, commanding only a supplementary wage. However, Elson and Pearson (1981) argue that this is not because of gender; rather the selection of workers is based upon who would be the most exploitable. Their vulnerability might just as well be based on ethnicity or religion.

It is necessary to be aware of the complexity of women's lives and not see them merely as an oppressed or subordinated group. We need to empathise with them, so that we can discover how they perceive their destiny, their position, and how they feel about their oppression. Perhaps some women do not feel they are oppressed or that they carry a double burden. These women may feel that by performing housework they gain a certain worthiness, which allows them to lead a harmonious life. To understand them we must consider their cultural background and their attitudes toward broader aspects of life. Alternatively, some women may perceive they are oppressed by their men and by their employers. The reasons for believing this will vary, depending on their culturally-mediated perceptions and beliefs. What I want to emphasise here is that perhaps there is a difference of understanding between women who are the subject of analysis and the scholars who do the analysing. It is vitally important to achieve an understanding of women workers based upon their own views, their perceptions, their beliefs and their understanding of their lives. Their voices must be heard, and research is no exception.

In addition, the older approach of the 'reserve army of labour' can supplement the explanation of women's position in the labour market.

#### (ii) Reserve Army of Labour

Women's work under capitalism is often explained by the 'reserve army of labour' approach. In this section I shall briefly clarify this argument, in order to show its significance to my research.

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<sup>18</sup> While Hartmann's point is very valid, she unfortunately lacks a persuasive analysis of how the process produces prevailing social relationships.

There are many interpretations of the nature of the 'reserve army of labour'. Curthoys (1988:48) suggests that since 1970 there has been a common recognition that women were a reserve army of labour.

The 'reserve army of labour' was a concept borrowed from Karl Marx. Marx had used it to analyse the ways in which capitalism relied on pools of unemployed as a basis for keeping wages down. Feminists in the 1970s used it in a more specific sense, to refer to the particular way in which women flowed in and out of the labour market as the economy demanded (Curthoys, 1988:48).

The reserve army of labour thesis suggests the existence of two alternative roles for women (paid worker and unpaid full-time housewife) which creates a practical and ideological flexibility for them that men, for the most part, do not share. This is very useful in societies whose labour force needs to fluctuate according to economic and wartime conditions (Curthoys, 1988:49). Cass, in a recent paper, wrote:

*Women constitute, and are used as, a "reserve army" of labour in industrial societies... In the Australian post-war economy, married women...have gained jobs when labour is scarce...and they are the first laid off in times of unemployment' (in Curthoys, 1988:49).*

Cass also states that unions often support the firing of women first. Basically, the advocates of this notion argue that when there are increases in production then women have the opportunity to work, but should be fired when production decreases. The important point of this interpretation is that women are easily hired and fired. Consequently, the industry locates them in low status jobs in order to minimise the difficulties when they are retrenched. Curthoys (1988) argues that the correctness and usefulness of this argument is questionable, showing evidence that the incorporation of women into the labour market has been steady. Barret (1980) has criticised the reserve army of labour view, stating that it is unable to explain women's involvement in the labour market. Moore (1988:114) also provides data to demonstrate that in certain areas women get more important positions than men - e.g. the Hong Kong experience in which, employers tend to give more opportunities to females than to males. This indicates that what is required is a multifactorial explanation.

I do not deny that women's incorporation in the labour market is important, and I agree that the easiness to hire and fire is still relevant to explain the position of women in manufacturing industry either in advanced countries or in developing countries. In the developing countries, several studies have shown that young female factory workers are easily hired by management because they are a cheap labour source and can be fired with impunity by management. Mather (1982), for instance, mentions that many industrial workers are employed on a casual



daily (*harian lepas*), probationary (*percobaan*), seasonal (*musiman*), on fixed term contract (*kontrak*) basis, all of which entitle the industrial management to hire and fire workers at will. In Australia, even though the union movement is strong, retrenchments in times of recession are unavoidable. The manufacturing sector includes one of the sectors which is hard hit by the recession. In Victoria, 16 per cent of all job losses in 1991 were in this sector (Ellingsen, 1992:4). Presumably, migrant women who have largely been incorporated in this sector, were affected by this slowdown. Further explanation on the situation of women in manufacturing industries can be seen through the recent globalisation of capitalism in which the manufacturing sector plays an important role.

#### D. THE GLOBALISATION OF CAPITALISM

If we concentrate on the impact of the globalisation of capitalism on women's position we find they have different experiences from men. There are several theoretical frameworks that have been used to try to establish a systematic understanding of the world-wide processes of restructuring that has occurred in recent times. Prominent among them are the New International Division of Labour (NIDL) thesis, theories of Labour Market Segmentation and a range of transformative theories which can be classified together as 'Post-Fordism'.

The NIDL approach, which partly addresses the issue of female factory workers in the developing countries, is also useful in understanding the position of female factory workers in advanced countries. Reich (1989:27), though not an NIDL theorist nevertheless emphasises that in America routine-production workers compete with millions of foreign workers, who are willing to be paid much lower wages than American workers. As a result, if they do not agree to a reduction in their wages, the work will go offshore. In challenging the cheap-labour of the developing countries, the development of high technology in the post-Fordist era is one of the characteristics that has emerged as a response in the advanced countries. The transformation of employment may lead to different outcomes for men and women. Wood (1989:5) notes that men may find more flexible and demanding employment, women find more intensification, deskilling and control. An emergence of hidden jobs which are worse than that of factory work is often linked with migrant women in this recent restructuring. In addition, 'the segmented labour market' approach is still relevant to explain women's position in the labour market, although it has some weaknesses.

(a) New International Division of Labour (NIDL)

The key argument of the NIDL approach challenges the previously fashionable ideas of dependency theory. "The traditional colonial division of labour in which the Third World was relegated to the production of raw materials has been changing since the 1960s", argues Munck (1988:32). Munck who drew on the ideas of Frobel, Heinrichs and Kreye, describes three basic pre-conditions for the change:

- 1) The breakdown of traditional socio-economic structures in the Third world, which led to the emergence of a vast pool of cheap available labour;
- 2) The fragmentation of the industrial process, which allowed unskilled sub-processes to be relocated in the Third World;
- 3) The development of cheap international transport and communications technology, which made this relocation possible<sup>19</sup> (1988:32).

This is basically an attempt to explain the flow of capital to Third World countries, to account for the global re-organisation of production and to interpret the development of industrialisation in these countries. Frobel, Heinrichs and Kreye (1980) argue that a new international division of labor is promoted by the advance of new technology which makes it possible to split the sequence of production, and to relocate low value-added and labour-intensive stages of it to Third World countries which provide abundant and cheap labour. Cho (1985:185) elucidates the argument further by identifying labor cost as the most significant determining factor in the international movement of capital. As a result, capital will keep flowing to Third World countries as long as the cost of production there is lower than in the advanced capitalist countries. Similarly, Mitter (1986), Elson and Pearson (1981) and Fuentes and Ehrenreich (1983), all argue that the main reason multinational corporations relocate to capitalist peripheries is to reduce labour costs. Along with this they seek unorganised and unregulated labour who are easy to hire and fire. Probert (1989:155) reports that the Malaysian government restricts the activities of trade unions in foreign-owned industries in order to entice foreign investment. The absence of trade unions enables the employers to pay lower wages and avoid the difficulties and costs of maintaining adequate health, safety and environmental standards. Apart from these, political stability is also one of the significant considerations influencing firms to undertake offshore production. Purwandari (1991:73), for instance, emphasises that social and political stability are important considerations behind the decisions of Japanese

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<sup>19</sup> Munck quotes from Frobel, *et al.*, 1980.

companies to invest their capital in Indonesia. Militarisation is often associated with a capital movement (see Mitter, 1986); military regimes override customary political obstacles to control the political stability and to suppress the activities of organised labour.

Ruling groups in developing countries, anxious to expand and restructure their economies, have encouraged industrialisation by inviting multinational corporations to set up factories there. Competition among these countries to attract investors is intense. In the developing countries, the performance and degree of participation in export production (which is the major objective of multinational companies) is uneven (see Rodan, 1989:1). Governments are forced to maintain the 'comparative advantage' of their countries by guaranteeing cheap labour which they can ensure by having a docile and non-unionised labour force.

There are several studies which examine how the New International Division of Labour has had an impact on female workers, for example Nash (1983), Lim (1983), and Mitter (1986). Nash (1983:viii) notes that over three hundred thousand women work in electronics factories located in export-processing zones in Asia. Mitter (1986) argues there can be no doubt that the cheapness and the docility of women in the developing countries is the crucial factor behind the trend towards 'offshore' production. The cheapness and docility of *female* labour (and not just labour in general) is advertised by governments of developing countries to entice investors. Lack of protection and job insecurity are part of women's working life in these countries. Female workers are not only exploited but are placed at the bottom of the job hierarchy. There are a variety of control mechanisms used in these Third World factories. Paternalistic control is often used in the factories for particular reasons. Grossman (1979:5)<sup>20</sup> points out:

As the manager of Fairchild's Indonesia plant explained, "What we are doing resembles a family system in which I am not just the manager but also a father to all of those here in Fairchild". This conforms to a very important Indonesian principle, that of the family [*kekeluargaan*].

In doing so, the management expects to pre-empt any desire by workers to organise and challenge the management. Similarly, Mather's (1982) study documents the prevalence of the centrality of patriarchal relations to the methods of labour control found in the Tangerang (west Java) industrial zone in Indonesia.

One serious consequence of the movement of capital to developing countries is that it has resulted in job losses in the advanced countries. Both Mitter (1986) and Nash (1983) note that over a million American workers lost their jobs because of plant closures. In Australia there has been a sharp

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<sup>20</sup> She cites from Daniel Dhakidae, 'If Management Works Well, Then We don't Need a Labor Union', *Prisma*, September 1976, p. 45

decline in the manufacturing sector, where, from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, over 200,000 jobs were lost (see Probert, 1987:147-148). An increasing number of Australian companies have been attracted to carry out offshore production in more profitable production sites in Asia (see Probert, 1989:156-157; Korporaal, 1991:38). Reich (1989) documents numerous cases where production workers in the U.S. have had to agree to a reduction of wages when faced with the alternative that their jobs will be exported to low-cost sites abroad.

While the approach discussed above contributes to our understanding of how capital movement has had an impact on female workers particularly in the Third World, it has several weaknesses. Munck (1988:33) points out that

Essentially it focuses on the world market to the detriment of changes in the production process and, as with dependency theories generally, it neglects the role of the state in the Third World, as though the world market could simply impose its policies at will across the globe.

Cho (1985:185) who also challenges NILD orthodoxy, points out: Alongside the movement of capital from advanced capitalist countries to labor-rich Third World countries, another, contradictory development has simultaneously emerged since the late 1970s. A growing number of production facilities of labor-intensive industries, the electronics industry in particular, are now returning to or expanding their production lines in the advanced capitalist countries, notably in the United States. Neither the thesis of the NIDL nor other purely economic accounts—such as opening a market, avoiding tariffs, or allowing for the product life cycle—sufficiently explain the recent movement (Cho, 1985:185).

She compared the labour process in electronics factories in the United States to those in South Korea, and argues that "the competitive advantage of 'cheap labor' in South Korea has become less and less attractive for industrial capital" (1985:186). Due to automation in the electronics industry, the total cost of production has fallen, and the relative significance of labour costs declined. Labour militancy is rising in the Third World, while in the advanced countries the political power of labour has been weakened.

Furthermore, the new forms of labour processes which have developed in the advanced countries cannot be easily reproduced in the Third World countries (Cho, 1985:186-187). Cho further states that these developments suggest that with the introduction of advanced production technology, firms are beginning to find it just as economical to produce in the U.S or in Western Europe as in the Third World. A recent OECD study found that major electronic firms view the economics of "offshore" versus "automated assembly" as roughly comparable at present (Cho, 1985:193-

194)<sup>21</sup>. Due to assembly automation such industries will re-enter the advanced countries from the Third World offshore production sites. I think the fact that there still are many factories that choose not to relocate in Third World countries deserves closer examination. The NIDL thesis does not sufficiently explain this phenomenon. Even though it has the above and other weaknesses, it nevertheless brings into focus a number of dynamics which are undoubtedly essential to the broader complex of economic globalisation.

Giddens (1990:75-76) points out that the expansion of the global division of labour involves differentiation between more and less industrialised areas in the world. He further notes that modern industry is intrinsically based on divisions of labour, not only on the level of job tasks but on that of regional specialisation in terms of type of industry, skills, and the production of raw materials. There has undoubtedly taken place a major expansion of global interdependence in the division of labour since the Second World War. This has helped to bring about shifts in the worldwide distribution of production, including the deindustrialisation of some regions in the developed countries and the emergence of the "Newly Industrialising Countries" in the Third World.

The most characteristic form of factory organisation of earlier decades, the moving assembly line worked by highly-disciplined but unskilled labour - a set of production techniques broadly captured under the rubric of 'Fordism' (see Lipietz, 1987:71) - has increasingly been moved to Third World countries. Lipietz (1987:70-71) further notes that

*... internationalization within the centre also has the serious effect of weakening the regulation of growth; as each country strives to improve its competitiveness at the expense of domestic purchasing power, the world market as a whole grows more slowly.*

Beyond the trans-national re-organisation of production and work, the further need for restructuring of the manufacturing sector in the advanced countries is important. But the net effect of all these massive changes is that the bargaining power of unskilled labour in the advanced countries is seriously reduced. There is more happening here, however, than a simple shift in production sites from one part of the world to another. The competitive drive for efficiency which is heightened by the exploitation of cheap labour on a global scale, has also contributed to the emergence of techniques of production which some theorists see as constituting a definitive break with the past (Piore & Sabel, 1984). These innovations have inspired the development of the post-Fordist model

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<sup>21</sup> Cho cites from M. McLean. (1980) *Technical Change and Economic Policy: The Electronics Industry*, Paris: OECD

(Lipietz, 1987). My Melbourne case study shows many of the elements I have referred to here - the importance of gender in the management of a low-cost, unskilled workforce, but one that is now, in the face of a local recession and increasing internationalisation by the parent firm, edging towards quite new practices. It may be, like many other industries, in transition to 'Post-Fordism'.

(b) Post-Fordism: in Transition

Among academics, unions and enterprises, the era of post-Fordism has become an important issue of discussion. There is a belief that the advanced countries are witnessing a transition to a post-Fordist stage of industrial development. However, there is still a lot of uncertainty and debate about these claims because the evidence does not sufficiently support these claims. Lovering (1990) points out that the post-Fordist debate is still going on, because an adequate new scientific paradigm has not been generated. I believe we are still in transition from Fordism to post-Fordism and the direction post-Fordism will take is not yet clear. There certainly has been an effort to increase skills and flexibility among the work-force in Australia. Whether or not this signals the end of 'Fordism' is another matter. Ford (1991) succinctly sums up the position:

*Australian management and unions have begun negotiating restructuring agreements. These vary from industry to industry, from enterprise to enterprise and within enterprises, and are the subject of considerable political and industrial debate. However, in general, the broad objectives include the upgrading and multiskilling of workers, providing career paths based on skill acquisition, and restructuring of the workplace for improved learning, productivity and quality (Ford, 1991:71).*

It appears some women (particularly women who used to occupy factory jobs) will become marginalised because they may not meet the basic prerequisites - the retraining which will be required if the changes are to finally correspond to the envisaged model of post-Fordism which is discussed below.

It appears the industrial methods of the 'Fordist' era are in crisis. Lipietz (1987:71) notes that Fordism is classified by the division of production activities into three levels:

- 1) conception, organization of methods, and engineering, all of which become autonomous;
- 2) skilled manufacturing, which requires a fairly skilled labour force; and
- 3) unskilled assembly and execution, which in theory requires no skills.

Matthews (1989:89) emphasises that Fordist mass production techniques are based on the principles of work organisation that include external design control, job division, technological control; e.g. assembly line, repetitive work, deskilling, work measurement, time and motion study, individualised control; e.g. incentive payment systems and minimal social interaction. But in many firms, the Fordist model is proving to be no longer effective.

The adoption of post-Fordist techniques is said to be an attempt to cure economic difficulties in the advanced countries brought about by the changes which occurred during the Fordist era (which began in the 1920s and began to break down in the early 1970s). The advocates of a post-Fordist transition are vulnerable to charges of a lack of precision in describing what makes this new industrial 'stage' distinctive. Does it exist or it is still imaginary? Clarke (1990:131) points out:

there is widespread belief, on both the Left and the Right, that capitalism has managed to resolve the crises which beset it in the 1970s, and that changes in the 1980s have laid the foundations for a new 'Post-Fordist regime of accumulation', based on new 'flexible specialist' methods of production, which combine new technologies, new patterns of demand, and new forms of the social organisation of production.

There are many experts, such as Kern and Schumann (German industrial sociologists) (see Matthews, 1989:35), who are convinced that the principles which characterize the new production methods which are called post-Fordist break with the identifying characteristics of the classic 'Fordist' workplace, namely the fragmentation of tasks and the subjection of the workers to close supervision and surveillance. By contrast the new methods depend on a labour force equipped for flexible specialisation (which is one of the dimensions of the post-Fordist era). This is defined by Piore and Sabel as follows:

Flexible specialisation is a strategy of permanent innovation: accommodation to ceaseless change, rather than an effort to control it. This strategy is based on flexible - multi-use - equipment; skilled workers; and the creation, through politics, of an industrial community that restricts the forms of competition to those favouring innovation. For these reasons, the spread of flexible specialisation amounts to a revival of craft forms of production that were emarginated at the first industrial divide (1984:17).

Moreover, Matthews (1989:108) notes that the principles of post-Fordist work organisation involve horizontal and vertical integration of tasks, namely a minimised division of labour; broad levels of responsibility and multiskilling; group/team work; decentralisation of decision-making, through worker involvement; shared supervision; work to meet basic criteria of worker satisfaction.

If the post-Fordist model described above brings about an alteration to the boredom inherent in workers' tasks it will improve the working conditions of workers. Because the model is in transition it is not yet clear whether the changes will benefit workers or not.

In response to the notion of post-Fordism, there are many different arguments. These include those who are uncertain about the benefits of the model and those who doubt the widespread existence of changes described by the model. According to Clarke (1990), the changes that are called 'post-Fordist' are driven by new technologies and forms of production; they are innovations stimulated by the economic problems of industrialized countries. Post-Fordism is seen by many as a production paradigm that reconciles the interests of capital with the interests of the working class. Clarke (1990) takes the view that post-Fordism technologies can no more liberate the working-class than could the technology and social organisation of Fordism, because it is the capitalist system, not technology, which oppresses the working-class.

Sayer (1989) is concerned about the scope of new developments in industry, regarding the literature on post-Fordist industry as still confused. The fixed classification of Fordism and post-Fordism, or mass production and flexible specialisation, undervalue the scope of new developments to industry. Drawing on the industrial organization in Japan, Sayer argues that forms of organization and contextual features that cut across different industries are more important than particular kinds of production or labour process.

I agree that there is uncertainty and that the range of new developments in industry is wider than that proposed by the post-Fordist model. The emergence of 'hidden' jobs, such as those created by the re-emergence of subcontracting and outwork should be taken into account. 'Post-Fordist' methods are only partly being applied to the industrial work place where the adoption of new technologies is leading to training to improve skills. Indeed, one of the greatest weaknesses of the post-Fordist literature (e.g., Piore & Sabel, 1984) is that it is highly selective, concentrating on particular regions and sectors of industry which cannot yet claim to be representative of manufacturing industry as a whole. It also seems to me that, as these changes occur, men have more opportunity to improve their skills than women. Baldock (1990:44-45) suggests that union intervention in debates about future changes towards post-Fordist organisation ignores women workers.

In Australia, the achievement of the post-Fordist transformation will not be easy. Ford (1991:70-71) notes that the continual flow of low-skilled workers from European and Asian rural environments to Australia helped sustain the fragmented and narrow skilled industrial base, a point which may be significant in the factory that I studied. The conceptual change and innovation in skill formation required will involve a shift away from a



narrow semi-skilled and skilled workforce to a multi-skilled workforce. This shift to a multi-skilled workforce will require the involvement of governments, educational institutions, enterprises and unions working together to research, negotiate and develop the transformation. A change in attitudes, beliefs and values of the population as well as conceptual changes and innovation will be required (Ford, 1991:71-72). Ford stresses that a major problem in achieving multi-skilling in Australia is that key groups, such as the middle managements of both enterprises and unions, are rarely comfortable in discussing values and concepts.

Whilst the belief persists that the advanced countries are witnessing a post-Fordist transformation, there are also other new trends in employment patterns: principally a shift away from secure, full-time employment to insecure and part-time employment. Wajcman and Rosewarne (1986:15-16) mention that, just as in most OECD countries, full-time employment in Australia is not expanding, but part-time employment is growing sharply. Most of this is poorly paid, and requires few skills. From 1973, over half of the new jobs that have been created have been part-time. These part-time jobs are mainly in the service sector where workers are normally hired on a casual basis, receive low wages, few benefits and rights, and are usually not unionised. The proportion of women engaged in these part-time jobs is higher than men (60 per cent of females work on a part-time basis and 43 per cent of males).

Wajcman and Rosewarne (1986:16) stress that although the current lengthy recession has led to high unemployment, the underlying trend in job losses goes much further back, probably to the early 1970s. In this more deep-seated longer-term trend, jobs in manufacturing industry, agriculture and construction industries have declined. However, the service sector (which includes health, education, the financial sector, wholesale, recreation and public administration) has grown steadily and is likely to be increasingly important. Dusevic (1992:26) who draws on a DEET (The Department of Employment, Education and Training) report, is also in agreement that the big area of employment growth has been and will continue to be in services. Wajcman and Rosewarne (1986:16) note:

*.....it would be a mistake to treat service industries as an homogeneous group. While the service economy is often identified with the growing demand for highly qualified professionals - and there certainly has been a rapid growth at the top end of the occupational hierarchy - the biggest area of growth has been at the bottom. Most women work in the service sector and the jobs they do there - cleaning, cooking, nursing, typing - are often treated as natural extensions of their domestic role and consequently devalued.*

A similar situation exists in the U.S. Reich (1989) shows that the trend of globalisation has affected different groups in American society in comparable ways.

In the service sector alone different types of tasks result in huge discrepancies in earnings. On the one hand, the service sector includes professionals who earn high salaries. On the other hand it includes part-time workers employed on a casual basis, earning low pay, and who are not members of unions. Raskall (1992:9) also notices that widening wage differentials are occurring:

*the income of the average 'family' has increased by 73 per cent, but for the lowest deciles the increase has been a mere 42 per cent compared to the 112 per cent increase for the highest income families (Raskall, 1992:9).*

Similarly, Ellingsen (1992:1) reported:

*The middle class is disappearing. The ANU's Dr Bob Gregory estimates that 400,000 middle-level male jobs have evaporated in the past decade and a half. The number of high and low-paying jobs has increased, creating a polarised workforce.*

There a number of statistical measures of these trends including: the growth in income of the top one per cent of income earners in the '80s was twice that of those at the bottom; more lower-income earners have lost their jobs than higher-paid; whilst high-pay occupations have had a real earnings rise, lower paid workers have had a real wage decline; the number of poor are greater (Ellingsen, 1992:1). In Victoria, 16 per cent of all jobs losses in 1991 were in the manufacturing sector (Ellingsen, 1992:4). Unfortunately, this report does not adequately specify sexual differences. Clearly, a large number of migrant women previously worked in the manufacturing sector and it is reasonable to expect that, as a group, they were badly affected by these job losses. As Game and Pringle (1983:37) noted, it was assembly and sub-assembly that opened up jobs for women and migrants in the postwar period of mass production. Certainly, the evidence from the factory I studied suggests that migrant women were hit hard by the recession.

The development of new jobs has brought about a different pattern between female and male workers, a pattern where female workers have greater disadvantage than their male counterparts. Baldock (1990) makes it clear that women are ignored in the attempt by some unions and managers to achieve 'post-Fordist' changes; women occupy part-time positions in the service sector more frequently than men. They are usually employed on a casual, low-pay basis and are non unionised (Wajcman and

Rosewarne, 1986). These factors may be counted among the reasons why males and females do not have an equal chance in the contemporary labour market in Australia. Additionally, during this present period of restructuring in the manufacturing industry, self-employment in the form of subcontracting and outwork (see e.g., Wajcman and Rosewarne, 1986:15; The Centre For Working Women, 1980) is rising rapidly. Wajcman and Rosewarne (1986:16) stress that these jobs are usually part-time, where workers are not organised in unions, and are hired on a casual basis with low wages. A similar pattern developed in the U.S.A. during the 1980s (Davis, 1984) where subcontracting and outwork, particularly in the textile industries grew as a consequence of manufacturing restructuring (see Mitter, 1986). In the U.S., for instance, large numbers of 'illegal' migrant women are employed in these jobs (see Mitter, 1986). Cohen (1987) argues that in the U.S. the 'illegal' entrance of migrants is politically constructed through law, in order to facilitate the interests of certain elite and capitalist groups. This may not happen in the same fashion in Australia, but the rise of sweatshops and outwork jobs which have occurred have clearly resulted in the reduction of real wages. In this respect, the view of emerging 'labour flexibility' may be very different from that argued by advocates of the post-Fordist model. Here, it means little more than flexibility in hiring and firing of labour in response to market conditions and is not based on the ability of labour to do interchangeable jobs.

It is frequently migrant women who take on these jobs and who become the source of cheap labour. The conclusion is that women, especially migrant women, are being marginalised in an already sex-segregated labour force. Wood points out that:

*.....while restructuring may mean more flexible and demanding work for men it may imply something quite different for women - more intensification, deskilling and control (1989:5).*

The prospects of work for women, particularly migrant women who have 'no skill'<sup>22</sup> are poor. The increasing trends towards globalisation and economic interdependence has brought about intensified competition between female factory workers (mostly migrant women) and other workers from socially vulnerable groups - regardless of whether they are in advanced countries or in developing countries. Reich's (1989:27) work shows that if routine producers living in America do not agree to a reduction of their wages, their work would go offshore. Also relevant are the arguments that have developed due to the globalisation of the economy

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<sup>22</sup> I recognise that the definition of 'skill' includes subtle, and not so subtle, biases in favour of 'men's work'.

and because of the intensified competition, which characterise the change from Fordist to the post-Fordist era. One of the dimensions of the post-Fordist tendency is that a multi-skilled workforce will be required. Presumably, migrant women will be excluded because of their lack of English language skills.

So far I have concentrated on changes which appear to be remaking the industrialised world on a global scale. I have looked at two of the major debates which raise issues of direct relevance to the changing external environment of the workers and the factory that I studied - the debates about the new international division of labour, and about the 'second industrial divide' (the so-called post-Fordist transformation). Lastly, I want to turn to an aspect of labour control which, while found in many industrialised countries in one form or another, usually exhibits itself in quite distinctive ways in particular societies like Australia - the phenomenon of the segmented labour market. Where this pattern develops, the separation of discrete groups of workers or occupations is invariably based on social and cultural factors, with gender being the most common basis of differentiation. In the Australian case, this 'market segmentation' approach offers some important insights into the position of migrant women. The approach also has some drawbacks which I shall discuss below.

### (c) Labour Market Segmentation

The long-term history of industrial relations shows that manufacturing industries have opened employment opportunities for migrant women, although arguably only as an exploitable labour source. The labour market segmentation approach draws attention to the powerful trends which place migrant women in secondary jobs.

International migration has increased over the past twenty years elsewhere, with Australia being a consistent recipient of high numbers of migrants relative to its base population. This movement has involved men and women from less developed countries migrating to more developed ones (see Cohen, 1987). Probert (1989) notes that during the 'long boom' period during the fifties and sixties, Western European countries, as well as Australia, witnessed a need for a new source of labour in order to develop the industries they required.

Post-war migration has been widely studied. Most studies of these migrants have concentrated on the issue of why they remain in a subordinate position on their new society (Evans, 1984:1085). In order to explain the difficulties of being both a woman and a migrant worker, the labour market segmentation approach is often utilised. Collins (1978), who drew on the ideas of Reich, *et al.*, illustrates four essential characteristics of segmentation.

*Firstly*, there is segmentation of jobs into primary and secondary markets. The characteristics of the primary market are that it offers security of tenure, demands skilled workers, pays high wages and has good promotional opportunities. The secondary sector is characterised by unstable employment, unskilled workers, low wages and a lack of promotional opportunities. It is usually migrants, women and youth, who are disproportionately employed in this sector.

*Secondly*, the primary sector sub-divides into two sub-segments: an independent sector consisting of professionals in creative jobs with high rewards; and a subordinate sector of factory and low-level clerical jobs, which are supervised and have little job autonomy.

*Thirdly*, there is segmentation based on race. 'Race typed' jobs occur within all subdivisions, but the majority of them 'mark' occupations in the secondary segment.

*Finally*, one can view the labour market as being segmented by gender. This involves the development of 'sex-stereotyped' jobs. They usually have lower wages and are generally concerned with a serving function which is frequently regarded as an extension of women's domestic role (Collins, 1978).

The labour market segmentation approach contributes to an understanding of how, under the capitalist mode of production, the labour market tends to segment; thus race, ethnicity, and gender are manipulated to construct separation within labour markets for indigenous male workers, coloured workers, migrant workers, and female workers, and for combinations of these categories. This situation exhibits strong economic patterns such as the payment of low wages to the 'weaker' groups, as well as reserving menial employment for such groups - and here typing is often based on gender and ethnicity.

Collins (1981:186) emphasises that in the Australian working class, six distinct fragments are currently recognizable. The first fragment consists of males born in Australia, UK, New Zealand, USA, Canada, and northern Europe etc (this categorisation is not exhaustive); the second of males born in southern Europe, (including Greece, Italy, Malta, Yugoslavia), Turkey, Latin America, etc; the third and fourth segments consist of females corresponding to the first two segments; the fifth consists of Aboriginal males and the sixth, Aboriginal females.

There is a tendency for each of these segments within the Australian working class to have different labour-market conditions. These differences can be demonstrated by examining: the occupational and industrial distribution of workers; workers wages and salaries; the conditions and intensity of work; the promotional opportunities and positions which exist in the internal hierarchical division of labour within a firm (Collins, 1981).

Migrants do not engage in one specific segment. For instance, both migrant men and women who come from the UK, Northern Europe, USA, New Zealand, Canada, tend to occupy labour market positions similar to Australian-born males and females (Collins, 1981:186-7). On the other hand, the southern European male and female segments have the worst jobs, that is, the menial jobs with the highest rates of job insecurity and the greatest intensity of work in the worst conditions (Collins, 1981).

The drawback of Collins' interpretation of the Australian labour market through the segmented labour market approach is that it tends to be fixed and thus ahistorical. In this context it is also important to note that the segmentation mechanism itself is either incomplete or mobile. A substantial number of migrant groups in one occupational classification does not necessarily mean that this group is not incorporated in other classifications. For instance, highly skilled Asians who arrived in substantial numbers after 1966 (see Evans, 1984:1064) do not occupy similar jobs to Asian refugees (such as Vietnamese). Collins also ignored the possibility of labour mobility, and whether this occurred vertically or horizontally. Hence, Collins (1988:78) acknowledges that migrants in Australia are spread over more occupational groups than in other countries where migrant males and females are concentrated in semi - or unskilled manufacturing or service jobs associated with the secondary labour segments. In addition to this one should define whether the actual labour process tends to improve working conditions for workers or whether it leads to a deskilling of these jobs. Braverman (1974) argued that there has been a tendency for working conditions to deteriorate. However, labour process continues to change and the results are debatable. The labour process is therefore a complex process in which it is not sufficient to consider only the present and the future but the past must also be considered.

It seems to me that Collins' interpretation cannot adequately explain how the segmentation occurs simultaneously in jobs, industries, firms, or among workers. Nor does Collins satisfactorily address the question of the nature of the Australian 'secondary sector'. Although, Collins has considered the situation of migrant women in some occupations in which particularly oppressive working conditions exist, we require a further understanding of them rather than a mere labelling of them as 'secondary workers'.

Another important critique of the segmented labour market approach has come from Lever Tracy and Quinlan (1988). They note that an important facet of the jobs occupied by secondary workers is their 'insecurity'. However, unemployment and insecurity is not only limited to migrants, women and unskilled workers. It has not always been easy to determine the 'insecure' segment of the workforce (Lever Tracy and Quinlan 1988:20). In recession, insecure job tenure occurs in many fields

and sometimes in unanticipated ways. It is not only limited to the 'secondary' job sector. Furthermore, we really need to know how we can explain patterns that are more complicated or different from those described above. For instance, some migrant women work with employers who use 'non-racist' and 'non-sexist' employment policies. Migrants in those situations enjoy higher wages and are less exploited by their employers than are other women workers. They also enjoy harmonious relationships with both superior and other workers.

The hindered status of migrant women in the labour market cannot be defined only through the needs of capitalists or capital. One needs to examine other factors, such as the role of the union or the role of the family. The ideologies of motherhood and the economic pressure of a double income for families force some women into the dual role of paid workers and unpaid domestic workers. Beechey (1978:158) points out that the 'dual labour market approach' is unable to analyse women's position distinctively because it ignores the importance of the sexual division of labour and the role of the family in structuring sexual inequality. I think this critique identifies important weaknesses in the 'segmentation labour market' theories. The dual role of women requires examination to see whether women themselves are comfortable about their two roles; which may well depend upon how the women workers define sexual equality, comparable responsibility, and the division of labour.

## E. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MIGRANT WOMEN IN AUSTRALIA

Differences in the characteristics of migrants are central to this discussion, particularly those discussed in this section, such as nationality, educational background and English language fluency.

From 1945 to the end of March 1973, migration increased Australia's population by sixty per cent (Collins, 1981:183). Australia accepts a much larger migrant quota than other contemporary developed societies with the exception of Israel (United Nations, 1978). These migrants come from varied origins; the British Isles which is the traditional source of migrants, the Mediterranean region, Northwestern Europe and Eastern Europe (Jupp, 1966). Since the end of the racist 'White Australia' immigration policy, effectively from 1966, a large number of highly skilled Asian migrants have arrived (Martin, 1978), together with an unending stream of Asian refugees, mainly from Indo-China since 1972.

Migrants from English speaking countries constitute 11 % of Australia's population, whilst 8 % come from the Mediterranean. The other migrant groups make up the remaining 3 % of Australia's population. The gender balance is approximately even (Evans, 1984).

Evans (1984:1068) notes that 50 - 56 % of migrant women from all the groups are active in the workforce. About equal numbers from all ethnic groups are currently unemployed: only 2-5% were unemployed in 1981. There are many complex reasons why migrant women enter the labour market. Some are the sole breadwinner and need to work to support themselves or their families. Some may want to have new experiences and escape from the monotony of family life. The most important reason for migrant women's wage labour is their economic contribution to their families which is essential for the survival of those families. The case of A. Marino (1989) is an excellent example of how migrant women have had to support their families by working regardless of their domestic duties and the condition of their health. Marino has written her experience in her diary as follows:

*I have only one moth of pregnancy left. Still no-one gives me a hand with anything. Mario insists he needs my help in the shop. He doesn't think that I might cause myself some damage carrying heavy crates of soft drinks (1989:20). In the formal labour market, unfortunately, migrant women usually occupy low-paid work.*

Martin says:

*Lacking social and economic capital, married to men employed in low-paid, low-status jobs, their social situation makes them a cheap and dispensable source of labour for manufacturing industries (1986:240).*

The issue of migrant women's exploitation in the labour market is a central point since it allows an understanding of the process of the subordination of migrant women at work in capitalist society through the manipulation of their social and cultural attributes and their relative lack of power. As I mentioned in chapter I, migrant women who migrated to Australia during the post-war period were usually dependents: wives, daughters, sisters, or mothers of male migrants (Martin, 1986:234). The reasons for migration varied, but these were mostly related to their status as dependants. Martin (1986:234) draws on the reasons given by Latin American women to migrate, saying:

*the priests told us that all Australian men were homosexual - the Australian disease they called it. They implore us to go and save our men, to bear their children and keep our people going ... we would be repaid in wealth and comfort (1986:234).*



Moreover, a woman's wage was often presumed to be a supplementary one due to her family responsibilities. The problem is that migrant women are often 'invisible'. Indeed, it has been said that the discussion of migrant's problems is sex-blind because migrant women are assumed to have similar experiences to their men (see Pettman, 1992). This disadvantages migrant women at work because their problems are concealed.

When we explore the educational background of migrant women, we find a broad range of educational qualifications. Eastern European women and Third World women are the most highly educated with an average of 11 years of schooling compared to women from other English-speaking countries and Northwest Europe, who have between 10.3 to 10.7 years schooling, and Mediterranean women with an average of 8.6 years schooling. These differences appear to be related to the different class backgrounds from which the migrant women come. Third World migrant women come mostly from poor countries where ordinarily educational attainment is low for the poor classes. It is probable those who come to Australia came from the wealthier groups within their society. Mediterranean migrants originate from peasant families and thus come from the lower class of their society (Kelley and McAllister, 1984).

Research has highlighted, that in Australia an individual's fluency in the English language is an influential aspect of obtaining employment. Women who do not speak English find it hard to obtain work (Martin, 1975) and when they do the jobs are low-paid and have low status (Ware, 1974).

However, other research also shows that having limited English skills is not always a constraint to entering the labour market. If we examine the experience of women from the Mediterranean we find the majority do not speak much English, but they have had little difficulty in obtaining work. It would appear that ethnic enclaves have developed where employment within particular language groups is available. Mediterranean women with poor English language skills have usually found jobs working with co-ethnics. Studies have demonstrated that chain migration from Mediterranean villages was an important factor in the ability of Mediterranean women finding work (Price, 1963). Mediterranean migrants usually rely on informal social networks when searching for work (Miller, 1982). On this basis one cannot conclude that English speaking skills are the sole means of finding work in Australia. Nevertheless, those who do not speak much English do not get the better type of jobs available. These jobs usually demand high English speaking skills.

Educational background and length of residence in Australia also impacts on the employment status. Previous research (Miller, 1982) has noted that Mediterranean women tend to occupy low status jobs,

supposedly because they have poor educational backgrounds and have a short period of residence in Australia. Large numbers of migrant women ended up with manufacturing industrial jobs which provided low wages due to their limited education. The Centre for Urban Research and Action (n.d.:28) who drew on their study on migrant women in Melbourne industry, found that the majority of women had limited formal education - mostly at primary level.

For all groups, length of residence in Australia increases occupational status. The effect of length of residence is significant in all groups excluding those migrants from English speaking countries (Evans, 1984:1077). Broom *et al.* (1980) noted that education is the most important factor in the differentiation between high status jobs and low status jobs.

Mediterranean and Third World women who do not speak much English lose out when it comes to job status because employers are unwilling to employ them in positions which demand high levels of communication skills.

## F. CONCLUSION

The incorporation of women into the labour market is not a new phenomena. A large number of women occupy jobs in the manufacturing industries. The upgrading of technology has made possible the transfer of production from the advanced countries to the developing countries with their docile and cheap labour workforce. The globalisation of economies has resulted in intensified international competition. This has left women workers in the manufacturing industries in the advanced countries in a very insecure position. Part of the reason for this is that the so-called post-Fordist era requires a multiskilled labour force, which by definition excludes 'unskilled' migrant women. They may remain in a job but they have to accept a standard of wages lower than they used to have. My interest about what was happening to migrant women workers in the workforce during this transition from Fordism to post-Fordism led me to study a group of migrant women workers in a factory undergoing restructuring. The issues I specifically addressed were the control mechanisms of workers used by management; the strategies workers developed to survive on the factory floor; the role of the union and how the union is perceived by the workers.

## CHAPTER III WOMEN'S WORK IN THE AUTO-PARTS FACTORY

### A. INTRODUCTION

A large number of women are incorporated into the industrial sector, particularly in those manufacturing industries which depend on repetitious jobs. Mitter and others argue that by employing women, management can reduce the cost of labour, since women can be paid lower than men (e.g., Mitter, 1986; Moore, 1988:113, etc). This happens not only in the developing countries, but also in the advanced countries. However, the advanced countries have to some extent developed the notion of 'Equal Pay for Equal Work'. In Australia, for instance, equal pay legislation was phased in by 1975 (Right to Employment, 1988: 16). However, the laws passed in that period have not transformed actual practices in the workforce, where, while there has been some improvement, gender inequalities remain. Whitehouse (1990:367)<sup>23</sup> notes that

*...in spite of the equal pay decisions of 1969, 1972 and 1974, wage fixing processes in Australia continue to discriminate against women.*

Therefore, there remains some justification in the claim that, even in Australia, women are preferred in certain industrial jobs because they can be paid less than men.

Another important argument why employers hire women is that women are not only expected to be patient and diligent, but also they are supposed to be submissive and obedient (see Mitter, 1986). Here, the ideology that there is a difference between men and women in which women are supposed to be passive and men are active (see Polk and Stein, 1972:22), may be played upon by managers as a controlling mechanism. In advanced countries women are more protected by unions; there, the women's movement has encouraged greater militancy by women (Mitter, 1986). According to Mitter (1986), the access of employers to a pool of passive and docile women has been undermined by the women's movement. This is one of the reasons given for the flight of capital to Third World countries. The Third World countries not only provide more docile female labour, but also they provide abundant cheap labour.

This argument needs to be rethought again because, even within the advanced countries, women vary in terms of degree of submissiveness. Cho (1985) found that militancy of female workers in the electronics

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<sup>23</sup> Whitehouse cites from Short, C. (1986) 'Equal Pay - What Happened?', *Journal of Industrial Relations* 28, 3, pp. 315-35.

industry in the U.S. decreased in the 1970s and 1980s. The availability of migrant women from poor non-English-speaking countries seems to be important in contributing to this development, because they bring with them the social and cultural supports of Third World patriarchy; and they are perhaps even more docile once they arrive in the U.S. because they are in a vulnerable situation. However, their conditions may be better in countries other than the U.S.A. because of different state structures and policies which lead to important differences in their treatment.

Moreover, women are employed in these occupations instead of men, since their depressed wages contribute to better profit margins for the firms that employ them. The presence of low paid women workers also puts pressure on male employees, tending to undermine men's wages. The argument is that, when men's unemployment is high, if management employs women rather than men, by paying low wages, later on men would also accept low wages rather than become unemployed, with all that implies not only financially but for their self-esteem and social status. Men particularly are socialised to expect higher prestige, to see themselves as head of the family and as the 'breadwinner'. They thus may even suffer psychologically more than women. In combination, these pressures will encourage them to accept whatever job is available, even with low wages. Therefore, downward pressure on women's wages can lead to restraints on wage levels in general.

This line of argument is not uncontested, and to consider it alone is over-simple. It stresses the vulnerability and docility of women, and thus concludes that the conditions they accept in capitalist enterprises are conditions of exploitation. In Third World countries like Indonesia governments frequently make the case that these women are better off under capitalism, with improvements in both income and social status. Officials point to studies (e.g., Leknas-Lipi, 1985:29) which show that the new female industrial workforce come predominantly from rural backgrounds. They are, so the argument goes, better off themselves, and their families benefit as well. For example remittances from their factory earnings are used to contribute to the education of their siblings, including higher education. These are opportunities their families could not otherwise contemplate. However that may be, many of the 'givens' on both sides of the argument must be examined more closely. The attitudes to women's work, including the attitudes of the women themselves, and the cultural values and institutional constraints that sustain their vulnerability and docility must be brought into the argument, along with the role of the state and the institutional structures which regulate industrial work.

In this chapter, therefore, I would like to discuss migrant women's working experiences in one part of Australian manufacturing industry. The factory belongs to a multinational corporation within which there is considerable scope for the management to learn from industrial relations

practices used in other branches of the corporation. The young single migrant women with limited education often exhibited characteristics of factory workers which can be found more generally in the developing countries, as well as in the West. By employing these kinds of women, the management achieves particular advantages. Because she is young, she is likely to be close to her peak physical and mental capacity, whilst as single, she would not have family responsibilities. In this factory, I have found that whilst there have been some parallels with conditions in Third World factories, in other important respects the situation in my Melbourne factory is different. These differences arise, for example, from factors such as government intervention, union negotiation and the personnel strategies of the factory itself.

In this chapter, I am going to discuss several points, including the general picture of migrant women workers, the economic significance of work and women's contribution to the family, the work, and wages and conditions.

## B. A GENERAL PICTURE OF MIGRANT WOMEN

In this section the demographic profile of women workers at the factory will be given using variables of age, education, marital status, religion, ethnicity, family background and length of service to the factory.

The factory that I studied was divided into fifteen divisions (see also 'The Work' section). Among these, the two that I studied, and the two with the greatest concentration of low-skilled migrant women, were the Auto-Assembly and Paint-Shop divisions<sup>24</sup>. Most of the workers in the Auto-Assembly division of the factory were over 40 years old, between 40-49 years old (approximately 33%) and approximately 40% of the workers were 50 years old and over. In the Paint-Shop, around 46% were between 40-49 years old, and around 29% were 50 years old and over (see figure 3.1)<sup>25</sup>. These high numbers of older age employees are contrary to the received wisdom about productivity in which employing young is supposed to be more productive than employing the old. The notion that young workers are more productive than older workers has been widely practised in developing countries where a large number of young women are incorporated into large companies. This is probably due to the abundance of young female labour and weak industrial regulations, among other factors.

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<sup>24</sup> The Auto-Assembly and Paint-Shop divisions were under one department, namely Post Moulding department.

<sup>25</sup> This figure was based upon the number of workers in July 1991. It does not include workers who were dismissed in March 1991, except for three workers of those who were recalled by the company.

It seems that, in Australia, company policy and the reason why factory workers remain in the employ of a single factory is partly affected by both unionism and State legislation. For instance, it is now a union requirement that if a company intends to retrench workers, they must consider the length of time a worker has worked for them when deciding on who to retrench. The longer a worker stays in one place, the harder it is for them to leave or be dismissed. The first reason workers give for staying put is because they have developed strong bonds with their co-workers; furthermore moving to an unknown environment is also unattractive especially for those who have language problems. Generally most of the older workers have been working for the company for more than fifteen years and the majority are married with children which also influences their decision to stay. Another reason is their union's power and insistence on protection for long term employees.

This situation would be affected by some factors which might derive from both inside and outside the factory. It is better for production efficiency if the same workers do the job continuously because any interruption to production increases costs. Every new worker needs to be taught the job, which takes time and because they will inevitably make some mistakes, both factors which will also increase production costs. Presumably this is the reason why this factory employs so many older and married workers and tries to keep them for a long time. If the reliability of the labour force brought about by the low turnover of the older workers compensates for the higher productivity of the young workers who have a high turnover, then it is in the interest of the company to keep the older workers. Here, the factory has made the choice that reliability is more profitable and therefore a higher priority than the less certain gains in through-put that a younger workforce might bring.

A leaning towards reliability rather than the raw efficiency of the young is only part of the answer. Based upon my observations the degree of productivity of the younger workers certainly was greater than that of the older workers in this factory. They worked continuously whilst most of the older workers would take a short rest in the middle of their work, usually due to health problems associated with RSI (Repetitive Strain Injury), a common complaint due to the way the work in this factory was performed. Some older workers who did not have health problems felt they needed to take rest in order to avoid tiredness. It seems that although these older workers did not work as productively as the younger ones, they had usually worked for the company longer and were far more loyal to the factory. Hence company personnel policy is also influenced by the desire to cultivate bonds of loyalty among the workforce, even at the expense, on the margin, of the levels of individual productivity that might be achieved with younger workers. The pay off as we will see is in the sphere of individual relations, where the bonds between workers and their

patron/employers is for most workers stronger than solidarity with the union. The union's power and insistence on protection for longer-term workers is a factor because it forces the company to make decisions which take into account workers' demands. Without the activity of the union perhaps the work experience in Australia would be much closer to the developing countries, and perhaps there might then be a preference for younger workers. Also, in Australia, young workers' wages are not so markedly different from mature workers. It would appear that on the 'age' variable there is a huge gap between those employed at the 'Bravo' factory in Australia and those employed in developing countries.

The educational level and social background of female factory workers in Australia and developing countries are very similar. The highest educational level reached by the majority of the workers (90%) was the completion of primary school only. In many developing countries one can note the typical characteristic sought by employers in the recruitment of women is that of young unmarried women with low level of education (Lim, 1984; Oey, 1984). Therefore, in terms of educational level, it seems the 'Bravo' factory's workers and female factory workers in the developing countries are comparable.

It is the policy of the 'Bravo' factory not to employ people who have high education as process workers. Aruni (an Indian lady) and Cheong (a Chinese man) have university degrees, but neither informed the factory of this. Both claimed they had finished high school. Cheong, for instance, said "if the factory know that I got my University degree, the factory will not accept me." Similar discrimination is also experienced by female factory workers in developing countries. In Indonesia, for instance, some women do not inform their employers of their real educational level, because the factory restricts employment to those who finished junior high school and below (Centre for Population and Manpower Studies, 1987:8-9). Presumably management feel that employees with high educational level, will demand better treatment.

The majority of workers at the 'Bravo' factory were migrants from NES (Non-English-Speaking) countries, such as Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia, Laos, India, Mauritius and the Cook Islands. In the Paint-Shop, approximately 68% of workers were Italian; they also made up 40% of workers in the Auto-Assembly. The rest of the workers in Auto-Assembly came from the other countries mentioned above, and their numbers were influenced by the way in which the migrant networks<sup>26</sup> influenced recruitment. Almost all of these workers did not speak English at all when they arrived in Australia. For them, their first six months or more in Australia were extremely difficult, because they were not able to

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<sup>26</sup> Later, I am going to discuss in more detail how ethnic networks influence the recruitment of employees.

communicate with anyone except co-ethnics. Sophia, a Yugoslav and now the leading-hand in the Auto-Assembly told of her experience:

*When I just came here, I was so scared to go out because I did not know what people said to me. I almost cried if people asked me. For several days I just stayed at home. I did not want to go until my cousin taught me a little bit English.*

Similar stories were told by other workers. Their lack of English skills also caused difficulties in dealing with official and other public institutions, such as at the hospital, post-office, and bank. Their husbands share similar experiences. Katherine, Toula, and Danni, report that the situation for their husbands is even worse than for them. Toula said:

*My husband always asks me to go to the doctor and post-office, and bank. To pay the bills, of course, is my job too.*

Most of the workers, (around 77% of those employed in both the Paint-Shop and Auto-Assembly) said they learned English primarily in the work place. They spoke their own language in their homes and in their social activities. They teach their mother tongue to their children in order to maintain their cultural and ethnic identity. They say that they would be unhappy if their children cannot speak their language. It is obvious language is an important part of their ethnic identity of which they are immensely proud. Many of the workers really liked to teach me their language. Every time I worked with Danni and Theresa (Italian ladies), they taught me Italian words. Stella (Russian) often did the same thing to me. Among co-ethnics English was rarely spoken. Auto-Assembly workers spoke English in most instances, such as lunch-time and during work-hours. However, the Paint-Shop was dominated by Italian workers and they tended to stick together.

The majority of these workers were married women, (81% in the Auto-Assembly and 75% in the Paint-Shop). Cho (1985) found in her U.S. study the same domination by married women in her electronics factory. The U.S women had status within the factory similar to those in Australia, but their economic situation was quite different. Cho (1985) noted the U.S married women factory workers worked to get additional money, whilst the 'Bravo' factory women worked because their incomes were necessary for their families' survival; some of them were the main breadwinner<sup>27</sup> in the family. Though companies in developing countries choose young single women (see Cho, 1985; Mitter, 1986; Mather, 1982; Lim, 1982) these

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<sup>27</sup> Some workers had unemployed husbands, some were widows or single mothers. More detail on this issue will be found in the 'Economic Significance of Work' section.



employees also worked for their own or their families' survival. Their motivation to their work is, in this important respect, similar to the women in Australia. In the Australian case, it does not follow at all from the fact that they were married that they were adequately supported by their husbands; therefore it is inappropriate to only consider women as supplementary contributors to family income.

It is widely known that some factories in developing countries discriminate against married women in employee selection. Being married did not become a hindrance to women getting a job at the 'Bravo' factory, nor did they have problems returning to the factory after giving birth, even before the implementation of laws making maternity leave compulsory. This is another instance of the way personnel policy at 'Bravo' is designed to promote employee loyalty. Kelly, for instance, said:

*We did not have maternity leave in the past. When I had a child, I always stopped my job for several months, then I came back to this factory again. We had no problem with coming back because this factory always needed a lot of workers, plenty of jobs. The factory even called me to come back whenever I was ready to work again. This has also happened after my second child.*

Similar experiences occurred for Patricia and Gina after they had given birth. Today, the workers have maternity leave rights, but they cannot as easily come and go with their factory employment as they could before the implementation of those rights, because of the recession<sup>28</sup>. During the recession married women have faced increased competition for the jobs from young single women. Possibly the long-term abundance of eager workers created by the recession and government economic policies of restructuring has encouraged this company to move away from its former stress on loyalty, reliability and stable employment<sup>29</sup>.

There is a possibility that the sharp differences in terms of age and marital status between the workers at the 'Bravo' factory and factories in the developing countries will be lessened due to competition in the labour

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<sup>28</sup> The factory provides maternity leave to workers. They have unpaid maternity leave for approximately one year but may come back before that time elapses. It depends upon negotiation between the worker and the management. In the past, workers could stop working for two years or more, and then return to the factory again. Workers did not have difficulty in coming back after leaving for maternity reasons. Gina, for instance, had stopped for two years because she did not have any one to take care of her baby. Coming back to the factory, she resumed her old position. The factory did not only call back those who left to give birth, but also those who returned to their own country for a period. For instance, Toula on her return from a trip to Greece was invited by management to return to the factory.

<sup>29</sup> This recent shift in personnel policy strategy will be discussed later.

market during the recession. My experience during several months in which I sought a factory job for the purpose of this study, was that most factories were offering jobs only to fifteen to sixteen year olds with English language skills. This discriminates against married women and migrants from NES countries. Moreover, if one considers the tendency towards post-Fordism in the advanced countries, the older migrant women in this factory will face great difficulty in getting another job if they are displaced by skilled workers.

The majority of Italian workers at 'Bravo' were formerly from farms in rural areas either living with their parents or their own families<sup>30</sup>. Based upon the workers' experiences, it seems there existed a rigid sexual division of labour in Italy. Carol, for instance, said that she did not do much work on the farm. The male members of her family worked harder than the women on the farm. Her main tasks were to take out parasites<sup>31</sup> from the main crops and to contribute to harvesting and threshing. All domestic jobs, such as cooking, washing, cleaning, etc., were performed by the women. This sexual division of labour remained when they married and had their own families. It has slightly changed since moving to Australia<sup>32</sup>.

The social background of the other non-Italians workers varied. Some came from trader or government bureaucrat families but most also came from farming families especially those from Yugoslavia, Greece and China<sup>33</sup>. Aruni, an Indian lady, used to work in a library, and her father was a government officer. Lolo, a Mauritian, was a trader in Mauritius as were her parents. Gina, also a Mauritian, did not work in her country of origin because her parents were wealthy. It is apparent that only a few of these workers had worked as employees in their own countries. The reasons for this are mostly cultural, or, due to lack of employment opportunities in their own countries. Gina, of French descent, said that back home it was not socially accepted for women to work for money. Most of the Italian workers suggested similar reasons. Rural women in developing countries figure prominently among employees of multinational corporation factories based there. Companies are attracted to hiring women with rural and farming backgrounds presumably because of their reputation for submissiveness.

Most of the 'Bravo' women workers migrated to Australia when they were between twenty and twenty-five years old. Generally, they came accompanied by family members such as fathers, brothers, husbands,

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<sup>30</sup> For those who have married before leaving their countries.

<sup>31</sup> The parasite was a small plant that reduced the fertility of the main crops.

<sup>32</sup> More detail of this point will appear in the 'Family Life' section.

<sup>33</sup> Two workers (Stella and Ivone) come from Mainland China, but they are not Chinese, they are Russians who never visited Russia.

uncles; very few came alone. The reasons for migration varied. Economic hardship seems to have been the most common reason. The situation was different from one worker to another. Stella, as well as Ivone (Stella's sister-in-law), came because the government of China had confiscated their land, which left them with no choice but to emigrate. They migrated here to Australia not only with their families but with all the Russians in their village. Sylvia, a Yugoslav lady, had a similar story; she came with her husband as a refugee.

Economic hardship is also the major reason for rural women migrating to the cities in the developing countries. They also end up in factories. Again similar comparison exists between the factory workers at the 'Bravo' factory and those in the multinational corporation companies in the developing countries.

### C. THE ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF WORK AND WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE FAMILY

The economic significance of work for women workers links to the family economy. Due to the necessity to support their family economically, women have to work. The women's contribution to their families' income is fundamental as the majority of them are the spouse of low income workers. Some women not only contributed their money to the nuclear family, but also they contributed it to their extended family - a practice which was influenced by their socio-economic and cultural background. Though women work full-time and contribute a large proportion of the family's income, the domestic tasks remain their responsibility. In this section I will discuss the economic significance of work, women's contribution to the family and family life.

#### (i) The Economic Significance of Work

My research in the 'Bravo' factory indicates that most migrant women regard their paid work as important to them and their families. In order to understand why this is important, one needs to understand the family economy. Rein (1980:15) notes that there are two reasonable points of view which are often expressed in answer to the question of 'why do women work?'. Firstly, wives enter the labour force because their husband's income cannot meet the families' needs. This type of paid work is referred to as 'necessity - driven'. Secondly, Rein notes, there is the image of 'opportunity driven' work, illustrated by "the positive relationship between women's working and the family economy" (1980:15). This model often applies to educated couples. In these households husbands tend to encourage their wives to work outside the home (1980:15).

The experiences of these factory workers varied according to the degree of financial value of their work to the home. There are many different kinds of problems faced by factory workers which affect their decision to participate in the labour force and which result from that participation. These problems range across economic, health and social factors.

For the women who were the main breadwinner in their family, working was obviously vital to them economically. Katherine, an Italian lady, is the sole breadwinner in her family, although she is not a widow. She shares her experiences on how important earning money is for her:

*My husband was sacked from his job eight and half years ago because the company was closing down. Till now, my husband has no job. Hard for him to get a job, because old, and no English. Two of my children still stay with me, we need money.*

Puncky, although only seventeen years old, is the main breadwinner in her family, she said:

*I was adopted when I was young. My mum and dad don't work. Every week my mum takes \$200 from my wages. I work hard for Mum and Dad, but they don't love me, they just love my money. If I do not work, my mum will hate me. I know this. I must work, ...I must give money to mum.*

Tragically she was sacked shortly after. Just before leaving the factory Puncky told me about her fears for the future:

*I haven't told my mum about my unlucky fate. I am scared. Mum must be angry with me and hate me because I cannot give money to her any more. I don't know what is going to happen with my life. I see something dark in the future. I cannot imagine, how my life will be when I am not working. I suspect mum will be angry with me everyday even though I may not make something wrong. I am so scared.*

From the above stories, it is clear that for some women, working is essential. For example, Puncky knew it was not easy to find a job in a recession. She realised the enormous importance of this job in her life and its importance to her relationship with her family. Yet she could not keep her job in this factory, nor could she complain and protest when the factory manager said that due to the economic recession she had to go.

While it is correct that the factory has economic problems, it could be the factory is using the recession as an excuse to justify alteration to their employment strategies. The workers do not appear to understand this. Glenda Korporaal notes that

*The whittling down of tariff charges, the deregulation of the Australian financial industry since 1983 and the growing attraction of Asia as a production centre and as a market have prompted a major restructuring of Australian industry in the past few years. Manufacturers are increasing their investment in Asian countries and stepping up sourcing from Asian producers (1991:38).*

This factory is one of those which is investing in Asia. It has first hand knowledge of the benefit of offshore production and therefore the degree to which the recession has hit this factory is problematic. All the worker is aware of is that she has to finish her job and leave the factory without knowing where she can get more work.

The type of health problems which arise are best explained using Carol's story. Carol's income is integral to the family economy. Carol and her husband both work in the factory, and earn approximately the same wage. Carol explains:

*Me usually earn about \$283 per week, the company pays me \$ 8.95316 per hour. My husband gets only little bit more money, around \$20 more per week than me. Here, if me no work, no enough, you see everything is expensive.*

She has RSI (repetitive strain injury) which is caused by incessantly and repetitiously doing the same movement. Lin (1982) found in the developing countries that health complaints were also one of the negative impacts of working in factories. Carol has been working in this factory for approximately twenty-one and a half years, during which time she had always been assigned to the job using the 'gun'<sup>34</sup>. Despite her illness, she is still working. She said:

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<sup>34</sup> The workers always referred to tools, such as a hammer or glue sprayer, as a 'gun'.

*Actually, me feel tired and sick, working everyday. Look my arm is always cramp every few minutes. Me need to take break when me got cramp for two or three minutes. The Doctor said to me, me need rest. But me must work, me need money. Me cannot work for all day, me only work until lunch-time, me got less money than other 'girls'. Me don't know when my arm get better. Me hope to work for full-time again to get more money.*

Obviously, due to economic necessity she has no choice but to work. Once again, it is apparent from these examples that the women workers' earnings are vital to their families welfare.

On the social and cultural level, different pressures affect women's labour force participation. The case of Wiji, a Srilankan girl is a good example. In the middle of my research, Wiji, a single mother, quit her job because she had to take care of her one year old son. She had arranged to leave work long before, staying only long enough to obtain her long-service entitlement. Her decision to leave was determined by the difficulty in getting someone to take care of her son because she did not like putting him in a creche where she felt he would not be properly cared for. Only someone who was close to her, such as family or a friend would be trusted.

It is clear that the meaning of work for women cannot be neglected. Their incomes are as important to their families as men's income are to theirs. In order to understand this point, it is important to understand the contribution of women workers to the family.

#### (ii) Women's Contribution to the Family

In this discussion, I intend to focus not only upon the women's contribution to the nuclear family<sup>35</sup>, but also their contribution to their extended family<sup>36</sup>. Their contribution to the nuclear family varied. Some women were the main breadwinners and in their case, all of family income came from their earnings. Another variation was when the women had higher incomes than their husbands. There were many reasons for this. The prime reason appeared to be that the husband did not work full-time. Danni, for instance, said

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<sup>35</sup> For married women the nuclear family includes husband and children; for a single woman it includes parents, brothers and sisters, and those who are still dependent on her parents. However, if the single woman is independent of her parents, the nuclear family is herself and children if she has any.

<sup>36</sup> By extended family I mean outside her nuclear family, such as parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts and so forth.

she could be independent; she said "I can buy clothes, whenever I want. I don't ask my husband. Look this is my own money!". It seems because they earn the money, to some extent they have a choice in how it is spent.

#### D. THE WORK

In this section, I am concerned with two points. These are: workers' roles and rotation of workers among different tasks in the workplace. The nature of work was often linked to the allocation of particular jobs to women. The types of work performed by women were repetitive jobs. In order to reduce the similar body movement and the monotonous jobs, and to distribute jobs equally, jobs are rotated among the workers in the same department. Whether these arrangements were really working or not, can be seen in the following section.

##### (i) Worker's Roles

This factory employed 254 workers on the shopfloor, 65.4% males and 34.6% females (see figure 3.2 below). The higher proportion of male workers in this factory was related to the higher numbers of jobs requiring heavy work. In Blow Moulding, and in the Injection Shops 1 and 2, heavy machinery was used on a three shift per day basis. The reason why women were not employed in these sections varied from the nature of the work and the unpopularity of working afternoon and night shifts due to family responsibilities or because of safety/security concerns.

The particular characteristics of the workers associated with different sections were described by the general manager as follows:

*It is a fact of human nature that we are not all universally drawn to the same things and hence in the workforce fortunately different people are attracted to different aspects of the manufacturing operation, e.g. some people prefer to sit all day and hence are attracted to work in assembly, other people prefer to stand and have more job rotation and are more attracted to injection moulding, still other people could not stand either of the foregoing and opt for jobs such as forklift drivers where they are constantly on the move. Men still tend to be attracted to the heavier work or put another way women in general do not find heavy and dirty work attractive so as you would expect you would find more women drawn to painting, decorating and assembly work than to work in blow moulding for example. Storemen and forklift drivers still tend to be a male dominated area. Injection moulding is mixed.*

This statement seems to suggest that management does not directly segregate between sexes, but rather it is the employees themselves who have gender-selected the jobs. This sounds very much like a management rationalisation process to explain why individuals do particular (monotonous) jobs. It argues in effect that people's personalities - their 'nature' - draws them to these jobs. However, how individuals end up in these jobs is, in reality, a more complicated process. The company has the power to select the workers, and it is they who decide whether it will be men or women who will be offered a particular type of job in a particular department. My observation showed that the manager often rejected workers' requests to move to a more interesting task, if it was not in the factory's interest. Vivian, an Italian lady, had been working for twenty-six years. She told of the difficulty she had experienced in moving to another place, as she said

*I worked in the next side (Auto-Assembly part) for a long time. Next side, actually is my station. I just work in this Paint-Shop after some girls finished. I don't like it here, but I have to work, at home there is no money. I asked [Sophia] after three days, but she does not want to return me to my station, she said that [David, a manager] said I have to stay here.*

A similar experience happened to Peter, a Singaporean man who was moved from Blow-Moulding which he liked to the Paint-Shop which he did not. These experiences contradict the manager's statement. In fact, management has the power to place workers and does, giving the workers, often, no choice.

The tendency for management to place women workers in the Paint-Shop and Auto-Assembly is probably affected by the nature of work, the diligence required in doing the job and the likelihood of paying lower wages. These concerns were implied by Stanley, a supervisor, who said:

*Most of the women have been given the jobs in Auto-assembly and Paint-shop which are generally easy and repetitious jobs, due to the women's capacity, in terms of diligence in doing the repetitious jobs and the physical weakness.*

Similarly, Game and Pringle (1983:31) report that women carry out all the boring and repetitive work which is connected with women's nature to be able to tolerate boring and repetitive work. It seems that management employed women for jobs which they felt was more appropriate for management's interest. In the Paint-Shop for instance, the



tasks are mostly carried out by women; except for the better paid spray-painting tasks which were carried out by men<sup>40</sup>. The difference in wages between spray-painters and process workers appears to be due to the way skilled and unskilled jobs are classified. Spray-painters are categorised as skilled workers and process workers as unskilled workers. It has been widely argued that the categorisation of skill is often biased in the way in which it tends to classify men's jobs as skilled, and vice versa. Ryan (1983:7) uses the job of ironing to illustrate this point. Ryan states that: "men who did ironing were called pressers and considered highly skilled. Women who ironed for a living were unskilled". Similarly, Joeekes (1985:189) comments that "the skill labelling of jobs is indeed in many cases determined more by the sex of the worker carrying out the job than by the nature of the tasks performed". In this factory, some women did similar jobs to the spray-painters, i.e., they sprayed glue into the material.

It is also important to understand the position of the sexes on the factory shopfloor. The positions of supervisors and above, were occupied by men. It could be argued this was due to male workers being the majority. But, this circumstance also occurred in departments where women were the majority of the workers. In these departments women, in fact, only occupied lower positions. For instance, within the Paint-Shop and Auto-Assembly there were few in any supervising positions; only one was a forewoman; four women were leading-hands and one lady had a union position, as shop steward. This pattern has been observed in many industries, particularly in the developing countries. Humphrey (1985) claims that multinational companies hire women in the lowest paid, dead-end jobs at the bottom of the job hierarchy.

#### (ii) Rotation of Workers

Jobs in the Paint-Shop and the Auto-Assembly sections are rotated among the workers. The aim was to reduce the exposure of a worker to a continuous repetitious job. It was felt would reduce the possibility of RSI. Besides, it was also to distribute the jobs proportionately in order to avoid jealousy. The major problem with the first aim was that many jobs had similar movements. For instance, a lot of jobs required nailing or screwing down on an auto component, by using 'gun'. As a result, the work rotation to some extent did not answer the problem of RSI. Some jobs required different movements. For instance, a worker was required to detach an auto component part one from a plastic bag and then she/he cleaned it by using moulding spray. Next, she/he stuck tape in the auto component part two, which was followed by placing screws between auto component part one and part two and then coupling them by using a 'gun'. The last task

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<sup>40</sup> See rates of pay in the 'Wages' section.

was to pack them; approximately seventy-two auto components inside a box<sup>41</sup>. Both in the Auto-Assembly and in the Paint-Shop, the majority of workers did not carry out one job continuously; they kept rotating. At times, when the Paint-Shop was busy workers in the Auto-Assembly had to move there. Due to the variety of jobs available and depending on the priority of orders<sup>42</sup>, job changes could happen often within the one day.

The workers' attitudes about work rotation varied. Whilst the majority of workers did not like job rotation, approximately 45% enjoyed it. The reason workers did not like it generally related to their ability. For instance, Sylvia said "I like to stay in one job because I know the job." Moreover, Lolo who was in the same position as Sylvia looked very worried when she was asked to do a new job. She did not feel confident in so doing. She mumbled

*I don't like this job. I have never done it. I cannot work as fast as the girl<sup>43</sup> who used to do it. I don't know, I am waiting to see whether I am going to get 'rework' or not.*

Moreover, it has been well documented that 'older' workers dislike 'change' which could be a reason in addition to ability. Those who enjoyed work rotation, such as Ivone, Kate and Sandy said they wanted to understand all jobs and rotation facilitated this. It also reduced boredom.

Work rotation could not be distributed proportionally because not everyone understood all the jobs to be done. Other important considerations were the age and physical limitations of some workers; these were taken into account by the forewoman with the result that jobs were not evenly distributed by her. Gabriella (the forewoman) would distribute easy jobs to Theresa and Danni who were over fifty years old, but at other times she ignored the age of workers. For instance, she often allocated a hard job to Martha who was also over fifty years of age. Theresa, Danni, and Martha always lunched together and it was noticeable Theresa and Danni would look uncomfortable if Martha received a heavier job than them. When Martha was assigned to work the automatic machine, Danni would say "poor [Martha], she's got a difficult job." Responses to how jobs were allocated varied. Some workers treated the way in which jobs were allocated with equanimity because they felt most workers sometimes got heavy jobs and at other times got easy jobs or they understood and accepted other workers' physical limitations. Other

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<sup>41</sup> This was a job previously carried out by two workers, but due to retrenchments, this job was now performed by one person.

<sup>42</sup> Orders from the car companies usually had a dead-line, therefore, the factory had to schedule the work in congruence with the dead-line.

<sup>43</sup> A Chinese girl who was sacked in March 1991.

workers claimed that jobs were allocated according to ethnicity and that Italian workers received the better/easier jobs, whilst non-Italians received the harder work areas.

The work rotation scheme posed major problems for the Italian forewoman. On the one hand she was expected to take account of each worker's capabilities and at the same time treat each worker equally. She pointed out that Danni and Theresa (both also Italian) worked quite slowly and thus she needed to give them easy jobs otherwise their work output would not be regarded as satisfactory. Other Italian workers understood this prudence but some workers of other nationalities saw this unfair distribution of work as discriminatory.

Similarly male process workers claimed that having equal wages was not fair because the work was not equal. They emphasised they always had harder jobs than women. In agreeing with the male process workers, Stanley, the supervisor, emphasised that at the Singapore plant, process workers did not earn the same money; rather their salary was based upon their ability and their quickness to do the work.

## E. WAGES AND CONDITIONS

Wages and working conditions will be the main topics in this section. The pay rates were significant to the hierarchical position and the classification of skills. The male spray-painters - who were classified as skilled workers - received higher wages than the process workers who were predominantly women. To the workers, wage increases - of which there were several in recent years - did not mean a corresponding increase in their standard of living. Furthermore workers were not always satisfied with their working conditions in general.

### (i) Wages

The wages were paid every Wednesday. In the Post-Moulding area wages were correlated with position which of course meant the top position, that of the Post-Moulding manager, had the highest wages among the workers in that area. The one supervisor, a Singaporean man was ranked one step below the Post-Moulding manager and his hourly rate was \$15.01447; he was assisted by one forewoman whose pay was proportionately lower at \$11.56737 per hour. In the Paint-Shop the forewoman was assisted by three female leading-hands and in the Auto-Assembly there was only one leading-hand. The rate of pay for leading-hands was the same as the process workers \$8.95316 per hour, but they received \$25 per week bonus for their position.

A diversity of wages also occurred among unranked workers. Wage differentials were determined by the skill of the worker. This pattern only applied to the Paint-Shop because Auto-Assembly workers, apart from the

leading-hand, received the same standard wages. In the Paint-Shop there were three groups of unranked workers, each group receiving different hourly rates. Male spray-painters received \$10.04474 per hour, process workers \$8.9516 per hour and the third group were workers who had been transferred from other sections and who were continuing to receive their previous hourly rate. Peter who used to work in the Blow-Moulding area was paid an hourly rate of \$10.39579. He had been moved to the Paint-Shop where his job was the same as the other process workers but he remained on the Blow-Moulding standard hourly rate which was even higher than male spray-painters.

Usually the women workers knew that male spray-painters got more money than they did. Generally they did not feel jealous of this male privilege because they thought that male spray-painters had heavier duties. Accordingly, it was not wise to be jealous of the men.

However, men were unhappy about the equal pay condition that existed for male process workers and their female counterparts. The men's perception was that they were being treated unfairly. Cheong, for instance, said:

*I always get harder work than the women. Look! women won't be given this job<sup>44</sup>. It is not fair we have the same money.*

The conclusion from this situation is that the men believed they should be paid higher wages if their job was harder. When this occurred there were no complaints or jealousies, but when it did not and they were paid the same rate then male workers perceived it as a matter of 'unfairness'.

Some women actually did not know what the other workers' wages were. They believed it was not polite to inquire about another's wages as this would be an intrusion into their privacy; also there was a fear that others would assume them to be jealous if they were very curious about another's salary. Although they did not know for sure what others' wages were they believed that male process workers received higher wages than female workers. For instance, Toula and Mona said that Cheong (a man) received more money than they did. Despite the fact that the factory was, in some cases, applying the 'Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value' rule the idea had not yet been accepted by some male workers, and was not believed by some female workers.

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<sup>44</sup> The job in question was to stick two materials together by using the glue that was sprayed from a spray machine, and at the same time he had to bind the connected material with another material by pushing a nail machine.

Based upon my observations, male process workers' complaints that they were always placed in harder jobs than women workers were not always justified. The situation was more complex than that, and cannot adequately be explained by reference to gender roles. Male and female process workers have not always done similar jobs; it was often hard to determine whether they in fact always had harder jobs than the women. Female workers did not always do comparable jobs all the time. For example, Sylvia and Sandy had easy jobs on Monday and Tuesday, but on other days their assigned jobs were harder. Similar situations occurred for other female workers although there were some particular exceptions, such as Linda and Jane who because of age and health consideration had easy jobs most of the time; this sometimes became a source of jealousy. It is clear the situation is not simply a matter of gender relations, but, as we saw earlier, also involves inter-ethnic dynamics.

The reason given for the different wages paid to male spray-painters and process workers i.e. differences determined by the nature of the work, was largely not relevant as some women often did comparable work, such as the spraying of glue. It would appear there exists a gender bias on what determines whether a job is skilled or not.

Another important point is the workers' views on their standard of wages. According to most workers, their wages have gone up several times, but these increases were not really meaningful since the rise in the wages was always parallel to the rise in the cost of goods. Toula, for instance, described how the increasing of wages did not mean a corresponding increase in her standard of living. She said

*Twenty years ago I got only a little bit of money, Now I get about \$283 per week, but twenty years ago I spent my money for many things, everything was cheap. Now, my money is not enough, everything is expensive.*

Similar testimony of the way inflation eroded the value of their wages was given by other workers. Workers believed that a rise in wages should lead to a rise in their standard of living, whereas today the value of wages had decreased because now all their wages were spent on the basic needs only.

Furthermore, another facet was overtime wages. The system was that the workers were paid one and half times the standard hourly rate if they worked overtime. Saturday and Sunday work would be counted at standard rates for three hours, and after that at one and half times the standard hourly rate. Overtime work in the past was often carried out by all the workers. Now, when the factory was busy only a few workers were

working overtime<sup>45</sup>. Besides, the overtime was carried out by the workers after being on strike<sup>46</sup>.

## (ii) Working Conditions

The discussion of working conditions will include two main points, health and safety, and working atmosphere and facilities. This section will explore the way in which health and safety, and working atmosphere and facilities contributed to the broader pattern of employee relations.

### (a) Health and Safety

In this section, I am going to discuss firstly issues of health and safety and then discuss health problems suffered by the workers.

The factory provided a medical centre with a doctor, assisted by one nursing sister. The doctor came once a week, and the sister was available every day to cope with daily problems. The company also provided a box of medicines in the Paint Shop to which everybody had access. The box contained several medicines, such as panadol and band-aids and other first aid requirements. Very often the workers cut themselves with knives<sup>47</sup>. It was also common for the workers to suffer headaches during working-hours. My observation showed that in general workers remained working when they had a headache or influenza. For instance, Eva was sick, came to work and was allocated to work on the line which meant she must stand all day. By mid-day, she was very sick, and she could not bear her headache. She asked Gabriella to give her medicine and to change her to a job where she could sit down. Her last request was not granted, and she had to continue her work at her allotted position. She said "the boss is not my mother. Mother always looks after the sick child, but not here." Another example was that of Gabriella herself who often had a headache; her face was often pale and she looked very tired, but she was always working diligently. She was continually busy, serving the workers<sup>48</sup> and was sometimes called by David, her manager.

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<sup>45</sup> The selection of those who did overtime work will be discussed later on in the 'Pattern of Relationships Among Workers' section in chapter V. This was because it was linked to jealousy among the workers.

<sup>46</sup> Detail on this point will appear in 'The Workers' Viewpoint on the Union' section in chapter IV.

<sup>47</sup> Most of the workers kept knives whether they were really needed on the job or not. Outside the job, knives were used by the workers in the lunch time to cut their fruit or other foods.

<sup>48</sup> When the workers wanted to get another job after finishing the previous one, they asked her. Sometimes the women were shouting.

The factory provided ear protection in order to reduce the noise of machinery<sup>49</sup>. However, most of the workers did not wear them, except when the sound of the tools they themselves were using really hurt their ears. There was a regulation that the workers must wear flat, covered shoes. This was in order to avoid slipping on the floor which was quite oily, particularly in the alley in between shop 1 and 2 where workers had to pass every day.

Any repetitive job whether it was using a particular tool or not, often affected the workers' health. It has been widely reported that these kinds of jobs result in a large number of workers suffering RSI (Repetitive Strain Injury). This often occurs in the developing countries too (see Lim, 1984). In this factory, the older workers<sup>50</sup> in particular suffered from RSI. For instance, as mentioned previously, Carol suffered RSI. She often encountered a dilemma. The firm's doctor had recommended that she be rotated to do a different job at least three times a day because of her health. However, she was too frightened to tell Sophia, (a leading hand) to allocate her to a different job when she felt tired because she feared what would happen in a recession when workers complained. For the sake of money, she is ignoring her health. Every day, one could see she looked very tired and often massaged her arm, to reduce the pain. She needed to rotate the jobs so that she would benefit from the total change of movement but even when she changed the job, it did not help her much because most of the other jobs were often similar. Sometimes, the sister came to see her and to check whether she had been changed to a different job or not. Carol often told a lie by saying "yes" when the sister asked her about it. The reason for doing this was to avoid any trouble; she did not want the sister to ask Sophia to pay special attention to her.

Generally, the length of time worked contributed to some physical problem. Carol, for instance, has been working for twenty-one and a half years doing a similar job with a similar movement from year to year. It was not surprising some workers had RSI.

As stated before, RSI occurs widely in developing countries (see Lim, 1984; Mitter, 1986). In Australia, it is true the workers have more facilities, such as a doctor, sister, and medicine that is provided by the factory as well as sick pay for eight days per annum. This is clearly beneficial to the workers. However, in Carol's case it seems that the doctor's recommendation cannot really help her to avoid the problem. In

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<sup>49</sup> The noise was derived from different machines. For instance, car trolleys carrying boxes were always driven everywhere within the rooms. The automatic machine that was located in the Paint-Shop was very noisy. The heavy machines in the Moulding shop were also the source of loud noise. Additionally, more than 50 per cent of the workers were using noisy tools.

<sup>50</sup> The ladies who were fifty years old and above.

order to avoid her injury worsening, she had to reduce her work-time to half a day, which meant a decline in her income. She went home at lunch time, at 1.00 p.m. Superficially it is true that there are sharp differences between this factory and factories in the developing countries, but in practice the differences are not so great as the weak impact of the doctor's recommendation shows.

Workers generally did not take sick leave for illnesses such as headache, influenza, or a little fever. The reasons behind this was not only because it resulted in losing money, but also because they did not want to be considered lazy. More than ninety per cent of the workers said that they would take their sick-leave only when they were really sick<sup>51</sup>. Bone (1992:11) notes that

*according to a recent survey by [the Institute of Family Studies], women often go to work when they are unwell themselves so that they can keep their sick leave in case their children are ill.*

Workers in Australian factories have more benefits regarding health and safety than their counterparts in the developing countries, and yet these advantages sometimes have had a boomerang effect. The cost of provision of these benefits such as sick-leave in the advanced countries, have partly caused the 'runaway' of capital to the cheaper developing countries (see Mitter, 1986).

#### *(b) Working Atmosphere and Facilities*

In this section, I am going to concentrate on the working atmosphere and facilities that have been provided by the factory. The Auto-Assembly and the Paint-Shop were partitioned off by a wall. Both the Auto-Assembly and the Paint-Shop did not have adequate heaters. For instance, in the main room of the Paint-Shop only one heater was provided. This was becoming a source of workers' dissatisfaction with the union because complaints about the lack of heaters had not been responded to properly by either the factory or the union<sup>52</sup>.

Similarly, the factory did not provide coolers in the huge rooms of the Auto-Assembly and the Paint-Shop which became very hot in the summer. The factory did provide cold drinks three times a day when the weather was over thirty degrees. Whilst I was there, Theresa went around distributing cold orange juice cordial and water drinks.

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<sup>51</sup> The workers considered being seriously sick when they really cannot do the job.

<sup>52</sup> See also chapter IV on 'The Union'.



The factory provided two rest rooms in the Paint-Shop<sup>53</sup> and one rest-room for the Auto-Assembly workers<sup>54</sup>. The workers in the Auto-Assembly did not always go to this rest-room, but sometimes used the Paint-Shop rest rooms located in the main room. Based upon my observation, it seemed everybody could go to the rest room when she or he needed, except those people who worked on the automatic machine and the line system. Those workers were required to ask someone else to replace them during their absence<sup>55</sup>. In the Paint-Shop, the rest room often became the place for a chat to other workers or to have a smoke for the smokers<sup>56</sup>. Whilst I worked at this factory, I never saw an instance of management being angry if they saw that someone was leaving the job for a while to go to the rest room. However, the workers did not go to the rest room many times; they believed that if a visit to the rest-room became just an excuse to take a break, the bosses would discover it and be angry. They thought the bosses watched them all the time. They did not feel guilty if they were able to cheat their bosses. For instance, they were proud if they were able to go to the rest-room several times and the bosses did not notice. Everybody went to the rest room approximately five minutes before the time to take breaks to wash her/his hands because workers did not want to lose their own time. Only workers in the Paint-Shop, and Sophia, the leading-hand in the Auto-Assembly were supplied with uniforms<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> One rest room which was located in the main room of the Paint-Shop consisted of two rooms, male and female. There were four toilets and three taps where workers could drink and wash their hands. Soap was also provided. Another rest-room in the Paint-Shop was located in the smallest room among the rooms in the Paint-Shop. It was only a female rest room which consisted of two toilets, two taps, and soap.

<sup>54</sup> This rest-room was not only used by the Auto-Assembly workers, but it was also used by workers from other areas of the factory, such as Quality Control, Canteen, and so forth. The female rest-room consisted of eight toilets and several taps.

<sup>55</sup> Workers usually took a five minutes break when they had the opportunity to go to the rest-room. I sometimes replaced someone in the line, particularly in the line where the worker's task was to collect, to check and to clean the painted materials. In this line, the worker has two alternatives. Firstly, if someone else was available to replace her, she took a break for five minutes. Secondly, if nobody was available, she could turn off the machine and inform the spray-painters. On these occasions, she would have to rush, otherwise the line would be full of painted materials.

<sup>56</sup> In the Paint-Shop, there was a 'no smoking' sign. This meant that the smokers had to go to the rest-room to smoke. In the Auto-Assembly workers could smoke while they were working.

<sup>57</sup> Male workers were given blue coats, women were given blue dresses. The material was not thick, so that it was all right for the summer, but other clothes were needed in cold weather. Most of the workers, took their uniforms off after work. They would start wearing them when they arrived inside the factory. The reason for taking off the uniform seems likely to be related to the hidden competition among workers. This point will be discussed in more detail in the 'Pattern of Relationships Among Workers' section.

## F. CONCLUSION

It has been widely argued that female factory workers in the developing countries are docile in the sense that they are easy to control. The particular backgrounds of workers contribute to the degree of docility. Mather (1982) claims that female factory workers were obedient to the company partly due to their religious background, which was Moslem. Religion, of course is not the only cause of women's subordination since it is a complex element. In this respect, one needs to refer to the issue of patriarchy. In the 'Bravo' factory migrant women were generally also docile and were invariably obedient to their superiors. They had educational levels and social backgrounds similar to female factory workers in the developing countries. In the 'Bravo' factory I would say that the low level of English skills has become a major obstacle to workers securing their rights. In general these women gained more advantages than factory women in the developing countries which may be due to union involvement and to state regulations.

The experience of the migrant women factory workers were not identical in terms of the financial value of their work to the home. Their problems range across economic, health and social factors faced by the workers which affected their decision to participate in the labour market. Some women were main breadwinners in their family so that work for them was vital. Their income is integral to their family economy. Due to economic necessity the workers who have health problems (such as RSI= repetitive strain injury) had no choice but to continue to work. Many workers did not only contribute their income to their nuclear families, but also they contributed to their extended families. Economic and cultural backgrounds were the significant factors in the workers' doing so.

The women contributed significant amounts of money to their families, but their position remains unequal to their husbands inasmuch as they continued performing more domestic tasks than their husbands. It was even admitted by some women whose husbands were unemployed that they remained the one who did cooking, cleaning, washing and so on.

The work they do in the Auto-Assembly and the Paint-Shop is repetitious. To reduce the exposure of a worker to a continuous repetitious job, jobs were rotated among the workers. However, this idea did not really reduce the strain because many jobs were alike in that these required similar movement of body. The workers' viewpoints on the work rotation varied. The majority of workers disliked to be rotated.

The nature of the jobs and the rotation of work have resulted in the low classification of their jobs. Being process workers, they received the lowest rate of wages among the employees in the Auto-Assembly and Paint-Shop. The wages were correlated to position. A diversity of wages occurred among unranked workers in which wage differentials were determined by the skill of the worker. In the Paint-Shop, the determination of 'skill' was biased towards males; there, similar jobs have been divided into different classifications. Moreover, if male workers received the same amount of money as women, they tended to complain on grounds of 'fairness'. Women in the same position never complained.

The company provided a medical centre, a box of first aid in the Paint-Shop and ear protection in order to reduce the noise of machinery. Any repetitive job often affected the workers' health, particularly through Repetitive Strain Injury. This problem also occurs widely in factories in developing countries (see Lim, 1984) and the companies there have little concern with health problems due to weak regulations and non-unionised labour. In this factory, health problems are becoming the concern of both union and government. Superficially, it is correct that there are sharp differences between this factory and those in the developing countries, but in practice the differences are not always so great. The fear of losing the job often discouraged workers from demanding their rights, including their rights to decent occupational health standards.

Moreover, workers were unhappy with the lack of facilities like heaters and coolers. The union has not given the priority to improving the working atmosphere. This was becoming one of the sources of workers' dissatisfaction with the union which also can be seen in the following chapter, 'The Union'.



## CHAPTER IV THE UNION

### A. INTRODUCTION

Unionism in advanced countries has been the norm in manufacturing industry. Unions have been instrumental in bringing about state intervention in many ways. However, in developing countries unionism is more often than not discouraged by the state. If one wishes to understand the position of female workers in advanced countries like Australia the role of unions must be considered.

The issues of unionism are huge. In this chapter, I am specifically concerned with limited issues. These are: the nature of unions, the unions' contribution to the improvement of women workers' conditions, and the workers viewpoint on the union. The most fundamental mission of unions is to protect workers, and thus to make sure that they are not being exploited by the employers. Unions embrace a large number of objectives which are subject to change due to changing socio-political and economic circumstances. For instance, during recession unions give great emphasis to retrenchment and redundancy (see Plowman and Ford, 1983). To gain their purposes, unions exercise a variety of strategies such as increasing political involvement or direct industrial action.

In Australia, there can be no doubt unions have obtained improvements for women workers, such as the 'Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value' decision, unpaid maternity leave, holiday pay, sick pay and long service leave. Unions are also intent on increasing wages, and more generally with conditions of work and workers' position in society. Unions clearly have more power than the individual worker, but the power of the unions may decrease in particular circumstances, such as during a recession.

My empirical research was conducted during a recession, at a time when the union had difficulty in negotiating with the employer. It is vital for unions to retain the support and goodwill of their rank and file, and especially in a time of weakness like this. Hence the issue of how migrant women workers view the union and its role is central to this study. We will see that, in fact, the union has a poor record of communication with these workers and its role has been limited because of its failure to win the women's trust. The unions in Australia are craft based. There are several unions represented in the factory, but in the Paint-Shop and Auto-Assembly divisions there is only one, a branch of the Miscellaneous Workers Union which is under the umbrella of the Metal Trades Federation Union (MTFU). In the 'Bravo' factory, the relationship between workers and union was not in harmony. They often appeared to have different interests. The majority of the workers did not like the union.

Moreover, union representatives on the shopfloor who were elected by utilising an 'informal vote'<sup>58</sup>, frequently failed to mediate in issues that were important to the workers. Even the shop stewards seemed to share the workers' alienation with the remote, centralised and bureaucratic union. The union's failure flowed from two main sources: its own lack of interest in consultation and communication, and the skillful patronage strategies of the management aimed at bending the workers to 'Bravo'.

Clearly, it is necessary to examine the extent to which workers participate in union activities and to examine workers' views of the union itself. I will do this later in the chapter, but to begin it is also necessary to understand the nature of unions themselves and to establish a minimal understanding of how they function.

## B. THE NATURE OF UNIONS

### (i) The Concept

Unorganised labour clearly has less bargaining power with employers (Burkitt and Bowers, 1979:2-3). Historically, trade unions were established in order to obtain workers' most basic rights regarding wages and working conditions. They developed in circumstances in which labour had minimal bargaining power, investors had central power and there existed an "interrelationship between economic and political power". Moreover once established unions had more power than the individual worker because "unions possess a wider range of bargaining weapons, while their resources and negotiating expertise enable them to identify favourable opportunities and present demands with greater skill, aggression and market knowledge".

Unions are and have been the most effective tool for gaining improvements for workers. Unions have several goals. Nankervis (1968) elucidates the nature of trade union objectives as follows:

*The trade union movement consists of all those 'continuous associations of wage-earners' which exist for the purpose of maintaining and improving the conditions of their working lives'. This implies a progressive policy of action to achieve many and varied objectives. The health, safety, and comfort of employees, reasonable hours and adequate amenities, the securing of justice and the prevention of victimization, the abolition of 'sweating', the achievement of the highest possible real wage, a reasonable measure of security and a greater equality of opportunity, better methods of ironing out industrial friction, political reforms and protective*

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<sup>58</sup> I am going to explain the meaning of an 'informal vote' later in the chapter.

*legislation: these are some of the aims of Australian labour (1968:87).*

Gompers (1967) when describing the ethos of America's labour movement said:

*The primary essential in our mission has been the protection of the wage-worker, now; to increase his wages; to cut hours off the long workday, which was killing him [sic]; to improve the safety and the sanitary conditions of the work-shop; to free him from the tyrannies, petty or otherwise, which served to make his existence a slavery. These, in the nature of things, I repeat, were and are the primary objects of trade unionism (Gompers, 1969:20).*

Both authors make clear that the mission of a union is to protect the workers, and to ensure that they are not being exploited by the employers. Moreover, they make clear that union's objectives are more complex in that they are also intent on increasing wages and improving the future of workers.

#### (ii) History of Changing Union Objectives

Unions do not deal with their objectives with equal emphasis, rather they have priorities that have altered over time. Their differing emphases are in response to changing socio-political and economic circumstances, argue Plowman and Ford (1983:5) who describe how these have occurred.

*In the early stages 'the main focus had been as much on the provision of mutual benefits to protect members against the adversities of illness and unemployment as it had been on advancing members' economic interests. But these became markedly less important as unions laid greater emphasis on economic and political objectives and placed pressure on governments to supply social services and welfare benefits'. The priority with improving wages and employment conditions has more recently been coupled with greater emphasis on job security and post employment considerations. Retrenchment, redundancy and superannuation are areas which have become the focus of greater union attention. This attention reflects the prevailing economic environment of recession, high unemployment and inflation (1983:5).*

Another important feature of the evolution of unionism has been the emergence of ideological diversity. Plowman and Ford comment that "heterogeneity and diversity exist even in the most basic aims and methods of unions" (1983:4). For instance, Cole (1982:9) states that

*some organisations, like the Federated Clerks' Unions, are generally considered to be conservative unions; others, such as the Amalgamated Metal Workers and Shipwrights' Union and the Waterside Workers' Federation, are usually regarded as radical (1982:9).*

Thus, one cannot generalise about the militancy or otherwise of individual unions.

Indeed, the situation in the 'Bravo' factory was that the union was not particularly militant, due to the inability of members within the factory to communicate. This factor mitigated the effectiveness of the union's power. The union's central executive had many high-priority objectives but the most over-riding objectives were those which dealt with the problem of retrenchment and the augmentation of wages. Concentrating upon these points of issue later in the chapter I will examine the dynamic between workers and the union in the 'Bravo' factory.

It is also necessary to explore the role of unions in improving the conditions of female workers. In the past women and men were paid differently even where their skills were comparable, and certainly in base-rate unskilled jobs. Today, the gap in rates of pay between men and women in Australia has decreased (see Curthoys, 1988). This is not to say that women are not disproportionately engaged in low-paid jobs that are classified as unskilled, because 'equal pay' legislation is mainly to do with the equality of payment for the same level of skill<sup>59</sup>, and less with the determination of categories of work as such.

### C. THE IMPROVEMENT OF WOMEN WORKERS' CONDITIONS

Australia is one of the most highly and centralised unionised countries in the western industrialised world (see Cole, 1982:8; Whitehouse, 1990:365). Apparently, some Australian unions have even been concerned with outworkers in 'hidden jobs' (The Centre for Working Women, 1980). There can be no doubt unions have obtained improvements for women workers. They were instrumental in obtaining the historic 'Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value' decision. This decision by the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission was phased in by 1975 (Right to Employment, 1988:16). It has clearly been of major importance for women who were often paid less than men for equivalent tasks.

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<sup>59</sup> One has to be aware of the male bias in the determination of skill. Besides, the assessment of the quality of different types of job is a complicated element.



This decision does not mean that real equality has been achieved, because the reality is that on average female workers, in Australia and in other OECD countries, earn substantially less than their male counterparts (O'Donnell & Hall, 1988:40). Windsor and Pocock (1989) noted that on average, the Australian full-time female worker earns only around 78% of a male workers' salary. Thus, an improvement to them can only be perceived in the lessening of the gap in wages between men and women. Among other significant benefits the unions have now achieved are unpaid maternity leave of up to fifty-two weeks' duration<sup>60</sup>, four weeks holiday pay, eight days sick pay per annum and three months long service leave after ten years continuous employment by the one employer.

Unionism, therefore, is clearly an important factor when one compares Australian workers' conditions with these in developing countries where unionism is characteristically discouraged by governments. In order to restructure their economies ruling groups in developing countries have encouraged industrialisation by inviting multinational corporations to set up factories there. Competition among these countries to attract investors is intense. Governments are therefore forced to maintain a 'comparative advantage' by guaranteeing cheap labour which they can provide by having a docile and non-unionised labour force. Mitter (1986), Elson and Pearson (1981) and Fuentes and Ehrenreich (1983), all argue that the main reason multinational corporations relocate to capitalist peripheries is to reduce labour costs. Along with this they seek unorganised and unregulated workers who are easy to hire and fire. Probert (1989:155), for instance, notes that in order to entice foreign investment the Malaysian government restricts the activities of trade unions in foreign-owned industries. The absence of trade unions enables the employers to pay lower wages and decline to deal with health and safety problems adequately. Labour organisations have recently come into existence in some of these developing countries, such as Indonesia (see *Kedaulatan Rakyat*, 1990:I&XI; *Suara Pembaharuan*, 1990:I&XVI) and the Philippines (see Mitter, 1986). However, the degree to which they have been able to improve workers' conditions is debatable. The *Surabaya Post* (1990: XII), commenting on a study carried out by Emman E Ramelan, noted that Indonesian workers did not recognise *SPSI* (the name of the Indonesian labour organisation) although in the factory where they worked, there existed a *Unit Kerja* - a local unit of *SPSI*. Apart from these, political stability is also one of the significant considerations in commencing offshore production. Militarisation is often associated with the movement of industrial capital (see Mitter, 1986) as military regimes frequently claim to deliver rapid development through enforced political

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<sup>60</sup> It was awarded by Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission to women working under Federal Awards in 1979 (see *Right to Employment*, 1988:17).

stability and the suppression of organised labour. In the Australian situation, it seems quite clear - unionism has been instrumental in the improvement of workers' conditions, even though in certain circumstances the power of the unions may decrease. Although it has been widely argued that unions are powerful, their real strength has been questioned by some observers such as Cole (1982) and Burkitt and Bowers (1979:1). Burkitt and Bowers clearly disagree with the assumption that the unions are very powerful. They propose that employers are more powerful than unions because they largely control the decision-making process due to their ownership of the means of production (1979:1).

In advanced countries, one must also consider the effect of the global economic situation on the strength of unions in their countries. The advent of large scale movement of investment capital from the first world to the third world countries, it is argued, is a high standard of wages and the expense of the benefits that are enjoyed by workers in the first world (see Fuentes and Ehrenreich, 1983:8; Mitter, 1986). The argument of NIDL (New International Division of Labour) also concurs with this; it argues that "labor cost is the most important factor in the international movement of capital. As long as labor costs are lower in the Third World than in the advanced capitalist countries, the movement of capital to the Third World will continue" (Cho, 1985:185<sup>61</sup>). The result of this, as Mitter (1986) notes, is that in the U.S.A workers have lost their jobs due to runaway capital. Similarly, Nash (1983:ix) points out "...there has been a loss of approximately fifteen million jobs between 1968 and 1976 in the United States as a result of plant closures"<sup>62</sup>. Reich (1989:27) argues that, due to global economic restructuring, routine producers living in America encounter many hardships, especially the threat of losing jobs which may go abroad. In Australia there has been the rapid decline in the manufacturing sector. From the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s over 200,000 jobs were lost in this sector, with clothing, footwear and textiles being particularly hard hit (see Probert, 1989:147-148). Probert (1989:156-157) and Glenda Korporaal (1991:38) stress that there has been an increase in the number of Australian companies that have been induced to carry out offshore production in more profitable manufacturing zones in Asia. These facts make clear the circumstances in which the 'Bravo' corporation has also chosen to engage in off-shore production in Asian countries (see 'Management', chapter 4).

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<sup>61</sup> Cho cites from Frobel, Heinrichs and Kreye (1980).

<sup>62</sup> Nash cites from Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison in their article, 'Economic Development, the public sector, and full employment,' In Marcus G. Rashin's anthology *The Federal Budget and Social Reconstruction*, New Brunswick: Transition Books.

Globalisation of production has had an effect on the power of Australian unions. For instance, it is also the case that promises of cheap labour power and little unionisation has lured capital away from Australia. This has resulted in loss of jobs and restriction of wage rises for Australian workers, which has in turn reduced the bargaining power of unions.

The differences which exist between the advanced and the developing countries are not only due to differences in national labour laws but also to the effects of runaway capital. Unions in advanced countries will not remain passive, but must seek appropriate strategies to maintain their power. Wood (1989:1) clearly points out that businessmen, trade unionists, politicians and journalists have all been involved in a discussion about the changes in employment and labour practices which is thought to be necessary for advanced capitalist economies to overcome their economic predicament since the beginning of the 1980s. Trade unionists have been concerned to work out their position towards the new production concepts and employee involvement. Mathews (1989) argues that a new approach is needed in order to enable unions to maintain their strength in the current situation; that in the post-Fordist era if unions intend to be beneficial for workers they must cooperate with management. Their confrontationalist stance towards management which characterised the Fordist period is no longer appropriate. Moreover, unions can and must change their tactics.

Baldock (1990:44-45) commenting on Mathews' argument also makes a passionate plea for union intervention in the process of change, in order to ensure the development of a post-Fordist rather than neo-Fordist future of work, and not one that ignores women workers. Baldock (1990) examines three studies of workers in Australia and observes (yet again) that females have lower status and hold lower paid positions. She cites Joan Eveline in her study of E.E.O. (Equal Employment Opportunity) practices in the Australian mining industry demonstrating that there existed

*a neo-Fordist scenario with a rigid sexual division of labour (women as 'helpers'; areas of work without any women at all); severe sexual harassment (women called names such as 'bush pigs' or 'dykes'; offensive nude pin-ups); and devaluation of work carried out by women (Baldock, 1990:47-48).*

Baldock went on to comment that

*[what was] especially sobering to read in Eveline's account [was] the extent to which principles of equal opportunity and affirmative action, ostensibly introduced in response to progressive government policies, were subverted to suit the interests of management and male workers (Baldock, 1990:47-48).*

Mathews' argument merely anticipates a situation which might develop at the 'Bravo' factory which I consider is currently no more than 'in transition' to a post-Fordist scenario<sup>63</sup>. For the time being the union continues in utilising the old confrontationist approach. Furthermore, as we saw in chapter 2, the argument about a post-Fordist transition is complicated and uncertain. And while academics and union organisers engage in confused debates about the post-Fordist transition the 'Bravo' factory's existing policy of fostering relations with employees to the exclusion of union representatives continues to serve the purposes of management.

#### D. THE WORKERS' VIEWPOINT ON THE UNION

An understanding of the relationship between the union and its members together with an appreciation of the workers' views of the union, is essential to an understanding of workers' position in relation to management. Theoretically, the union protects the workers and ensures that they are not exploited by employers. However, theory and practice often diverged. This occurred because of several factors such as the political interests of a given union, or the threatened decline of a particular union's power, or from the failure of shop stewards to mediate and from ineffective communication between workers and the union. Other aspects which need to be taken into account are that workers' interests are sometimes sacrificed when unions act in their own interest; workers' dissatisfaction with the union because of perceived lack of action on their behalf; conflict from time to time between union demands of the workers

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<sup>63</sup> I consider this factory in transition because they have conducted 'in plant training' in response to economic problems, which involve Injection & Blow Moulding and Maintenance shops ('Bravo' news, March 1991). Technology upgrades in Australian plants has been carried out. For instance, this factory is a pioneer in solid-state computer controls for injection-moulding machines and robots for trimming blow-moulded products ('Bravo' Annual Report, 1990). However, it is still far from the post-Fordist scenario. Rather a Fordist approach remains in use in the factory. Mathews (1989) notes that post-Fordist approaches to skills formation are characterised by the following: "Broad-based job categories - defined by skill levels of qualified staff, rather than machine characteristics, and in which payment levels reflect skill acquired; career progression - based on a skill-based ladder of jobs, implying the operation of new selection criteria for jobs; adult apprenticeship; and access to a flexible public education and training system; multiskilling/group skilling - as opposed to single trade qualification; training as part of the job - implying increased levels of training, on and off the job, and increased scope for training" (1989:129). Training within some sections in the 'Bravo' factory has not yet occurred, for instance, in the Paint-Shop and Auto-Assembly where women are the dominant group; nor is there any indication training will be conducted there. Several sections, including these two sections, have not carried out technology upgrades yet.

and the workers' interest in being loyal to their employer. In the 'Bravo' factory, union membership is compulsory for shopfloor workers. It is a 'closed shop'. As mentioned above, there is only one union in the Paint-Shop and Auto-Assembly (the Miscellaneous Workers Union), I will therefore only talk about it. There were two shop stewards in these sections, John (an Australian) and Kelly (an Italian). They were elected through 'an informal vote'. Basically, most of the workers were reluctant to be nominated as shop stewards. The reasons are mainly due to the language barrier and to the unwillingness to bear the duties of a union representative. The shop stewards had emerged on the basis of their own nomination which was informally accepted by the workers. Fluency in English was the main attribute supporting their self-nomination as shop stewards since this appeared to be necessary to the discharge of shop stewards' duties. Their main duties were to mediate in conflicts between union and management, and to receive workers' complaints which had to be passed on to full-time union officials at Trades Hall.

In general, I must say that they have failed to mediate. This was not due to the language barrier as John himself is an Australian. I would say that this was affected by several factors. The shop stewards probably share the other workers' feelings of alienation and share too the feeling of insecurity, particularly in this time of recession and high unemployment. Kelly, a female shop steward, often expressed her feelings of uncertainty regarding the job. She was hard-working, but she talked to workers alongside her only if it was necessary. She would avoid allowing me to talk to her if David (her manager) was around. John, the other shop steward, was disappointed when he could not protect his girl friend from retrenchment. Only after the factory decided to re-employ some of the ex-workers, could John suggest to David and Gabriella (a forewoman) that they include his girl friend. Apart from this, on one occasion where I attended the meeting between union delegate and shop stewards, John warned me not to tell the management what I have heard, particularly because I recorded their discussion. John spoke seriously to me: "I am gonna kill you, if you tell this information to the management". At the beginning, John would not agree to let me record their discussion, but he finally agreed once I solemnly promised not to pass on what was said to the management.

From these stories, it could be said that their position as shop stewards did not reduce their feelings of insecurity about their jobs. They realised that an economic pretext could be a sufficient weapon for the management to threaten them personally and thereby undermine the union's power.

The majority of the workers have stated that they usually did not discuss their dissatisfactions with their shop stewards. Indeed, almost all of the women workers did not like the union for a variety of reasons,

although ironically it was the only body purporting to look after their interests. The women workers felt that the union did nothing for them and indeed, objectively it was not able to help them very much at all.

As discussed previously the working conditions of the women were no longer a central concern of the union. The example used by the workers to demonstrate this was that their working conditions in the factory are far from adequate. Management did not provide enough heaters or fans for the size of the work areas. The reality was that in the summer conditions were stifling and in the winter freezing. It was impossible to work comfortably during climatically extreme periods. The union's neglect of work conditions was no doubt related to the change of priority described above by Plowman and Ford. Today, the pressing problems of retrenchment and wages are more central to this union's concerns, with the most important being that of retrenchment.

As mentioned earlier, this factory has retrenched a number of workers whose jobs the union had tried to save by negotiating with management. They were unsuccessful due to the loss of negotiating power brought on by the recession. Ultimately, the union was only able to negotiate with management to provide 'certain benefits'<sup>64</sup> for those who were going to be retrenched. On the last day, Kelly (a female shop steward) checked one by one those who were retrenched to make sure that they received the amount that was decided on the basis of agreement between union and management.

The workers did not understand the union's position, they only knew that their friends were sacked. Some workers were greatly disappointed by the union's inability to prevent the dismissal of workers. They complained that they were forced to pay membership fees every week, for nothing. Fear of dismissal was a central topic of discussion among the workers. It was discussed whenever they talked with each other in places such as in the canteen, in the group work sessions or with workers working alongside them. Katherine, an Italian lady, for instance, was constantly worried about the current situation. She explained how the situation in the factory had changed and how the union had attempted to handle the situation as the number of workers were reduced 'bit-by-bit'. "It seemed", she said, "that the retrenchment of workers will recur, maybe next year, or in the next two years, and we who are the workers, know nothing".

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<sup>64</sup> Specifically these benefits included three weeks wages for each year of work, plus sick and holiday pay. For example, Puncky had worked for two years and seven months, when she was fired, she received eight point one (8.1) weeks' wages, plus eight days' sick pay and four weeks' holiday pay.

The recession has resulted in the factory dismissing both male and female workers. In December 1990 three women from the Post-Moulding section were fired. This event depressed and saddened the other workers since those who were fired were taken by surprise. Mona, a worker, described the situation as follows:

*I saw three of my friends were called by the boss, I was questioning myself what is going on, but I haven't got the answer until they went back from the boss' room. They told us, while they were crying, that they had to finish the work by 3 p.m today. We all were scared after listening to their unlucky news.*

Dismissal of workers in the Post-Moulding section reoccurred again three months later in March 1991, with the retrenchment of a further twelve workers; again caused by the recession. This factory is particularly vulnerable in a recession because of its dependence supplying car companies whose sales often face market fluctuations during the recession. For instance, Nissan closed their factory down for approximately one month in 1991 and plan to do so again in October 1992 (*The Australian*, Feb 1992; *Herald-Sun*, Feb 1992). These dismissals and the closing of automobile plants led to a general feeling of insecurity amongst the workers. Wilson said

*the company [Nissan] intended to retrench 1800 Clayton workers by October, with only 800 remaining at its distribution headquarters and the Dandenong plant (1992:4).*

This news published in several Australian newspapers, has become the most topical issue of conversation at the 'Bravo' factory. Dorothy described the factory as being very quiet; "by this Christmas (December, 1992) we may lose our job." Her forecast may be justified because the 'Bravo' factory also fits out Nissan vehicles. According to *The Australian* (February 1992), that company risks closure which will not only affect Nissan workers but also those in related industries, such as the car suppliers. It seems that 'the recession' has become a useful weapon for the company to fire workers.

Similarly, the *Surabaya Post* (1990) found that 'the recession' excuse was often used by Indonesian companies to retrench workers. The situation was much worse in this country where labour had not been effectively organised. In Australia unions have had sufficient power to negotiate with management and at least make sure workers who were going to be retrenched received certain benefits. This would not happen in developing countries where labour is in abundance and legal safeguards are, at best, minimal. While the differences in labour practices between

developed and developing countries are not as extreme as they may at first appear to be, the different decisions that free unions and State legislation governing labour relations in each country make are still very important.

In the past decade in Australia, unions have often been successful in obtaining normal wage increments. However, these wage rises have not kept pace with inflation so that there has been a decrease in real wages. The unions realise that the maintenance of real wages is a crucial problem, otherwise, the standard of living of workers will suffer. Currently, demands for wage increases are difficult to win, particularly during a recession. Even though there were many strikes in the 'Bravo' factory, the result was zero. This was due to many reasons, but the most important reason was the recession. The factory continues to dismiss workers and this is a strong deterrent to requests for wage increases. Strikes have proved an ineffective weapon in coercing the factory management. The union will have to re-examine their strategy of using strike as a weapon with which to challenge management over higher wages. The union knows that workers always do overtime after strikes, which effectively renders the strike weapon impotent.

During the period of my fieldwork, strikes occurred on five occasions. The call for strikes was mainly from Trades Hall. They occurred for different reasons, such as stop-work meetings<sup>65</sup>, pay rises, and solidarity actions<sup>66</sup>. On Monday 8, May 1991 after lunch workers held a meeting to discuss a proposed stop-work scheduled for the next day. The meeting of workers was instigated by the management who suggested that all workers, apart from the shop stewards who had to attend the meeting, continue to work. The reason for the suggestion was management's awareness that the majority of workers did not attend union meetings. Then, the shop steward's spokesperson, John, asked all the workers to comment upon this suggestion. Everybody kept quiet except an old man, Roberto, who reminded those present of previous experiences. He pointed out that in the past when workers continued working during the stop-work meeting the 'big union'<sup>67</sup> came and delivered an ultimatum, that the union would close down the factory if the workers did not stop working. Another worker, a woman, Eva, who spoke in Italian (which annoyed some workers not conversant with her language), indicated she also was concerned about the possibility that continuing to work might bring conflict with the union. The shop steward's spokesperson then asked all workers to vote on whether they intended to work or not. Except for two

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<sup>65</sup> The stop-work meetings were discussing various matters, including pay rises.

<sup>66</sup> The most frequent strikes were those called in solidarity with workers in other firms. It was seldom this company that created problems which brought about the strikes.

<sup>67</sup> The workers always called anyone above the shop steward, such as a union delegate, a 'big union'.



workers, most workers indicated they intended to continue working rather than stop work, since this meant losing money. After the meeting, the shop stewards informed the management about the workers' decision and then contacted the 'big union' regarding the agreement which the workers had voted for. The 'big union' however did not accept the workers' decision. They decided to conduct a stop-work meeting for all members of many related unions. About 3 p.m, the shop stewards informed workers that they had no option but to stop-work for three hours.

A dilemma clearly exists for the workers. On the one hand they have to follow the union's demands; if they remain working, the union will take action against the company which will result in loss of work. On the other hand they need their jobs and it is not in their interest to make the company fail to reach its target which may cause it to lose orders. They feel a certain loyalty to the company, and realise a stop-work may affect the company and might result in job retrenchments. The management has made this possibility clear to the workers. This situation confuses the workers, because often when workers have gone on strike, they have immediately afterwards been required by the management to work overtime so that targets can still be reached. To the workers, this overtime is viewed as compensation money for what they lost while on strike. This action by workers has been criticised by the shop stewards several times because it undermines the union and the point of the strike, which results in workers not getting pay rises. The fact is most workers do not believe they will get a pay rise and many people have already lost their jobs. Some women were angry with the union. Danni, for instance, said "if union always ask money from factory, the factory will go bankrupt and we will be the victims, we will be sacked". Danni and other co-workers who believe the factory will be forced into liquidation, have been influenced by the middle management officials<sup>68</sup> who have been propagating these ideas as part of worker control strategy. The family analogy used in the rhetoric of company managers to achieve worker control is similar to Mather's study in Indonesia (1982)<sup>69</sup>. In the 'Bravo' factory, middle management did not tell workers about the company's progress, but tended to emphasise the slow down<sup>70</sup>. Moreover, a supervisor who used to work at the Singapore plant, often informed the workers that they were lucky because in the Singapore plant women workers were paid very little. This information became an effective scare tactic because it succeeded in making the workers work harder and harder.

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<sup>68</sup> Middle management are the manager, supervisor, forewoman, and the leading-hand.

<sup>69</sup> I have discussed this phenomenon in more detail in 'Control Mechanisms' section in chapter V.

<sup>70</sup> For instance, they did not publicise the factory's profits, but they always told workers about its losses.

It was not that the workers did not want to have more money nor that they thought the company paid proper wages, but they were mostly fearful of losing their jobs. Skevvie, from Greece, for instance, complained "we work like slave, no enough money." The workers are in a 'catch-22' situation. If they do not strike, they will not get pay rises; if they do strike, they risk the company's financial collapse or at least the loss of orders. They mostly choose to strike, and work overtime after the strike.

The experiences above suggest that the union's failure to gain the total support of the workers was affected by the power of management which made working overtime after a strike compulsory for all workers. This indicates that this management had more power than the union, and their strategy of influencing the workers informally was a significant control mechanism and demonstrated the unequal power relations that exist in the factory.

Other important factors contributing to the low esteem of the union are its failure to effectively communicate information regarding its proposals to the workers. Nor has it found effective ways to harness worker loyalty to it. Most workers do not understand what is being discussed during union meetings due to language and other communication difficulties. The Centre for Urban Research and Action (n.d: 56) found that women workers from non-English speaking countries do not understand what is said in union meetings. Often, the women workers at the 'Bravo' factory would understand what was going on through a late rumour based on the shop-stewards meeting with the union delegate. If their understanding of the union's proposals is based on such rumors, which are often incorrect, it is not surprising the workers misunderstand the union.

Another example of the effect of the language barrier was in relation to superannuation. Most of the workers did not really understand the purpose of superannuation. Some Italian workers did because one of the shop stewards, Kelly, an Italian, often explained issues in Italian to the Italian workers. If Italian workers, unlike most of the other workers, had a problem, they were able to talk to this shop steward and air their grievances. At a meeting attended by the shop steward and the union delegate, which discussed superannuation issues, Kelly was able to present the problem of two Italian workers, Angelo and Madona. They were asked to discuss their problems and as their English language skills were not good enough, especially in front of many people, their Italian was translated into English by Kelly. These workers were fortunate to be able to air their problems but only because they shared a common language with the shop steward. Others were not so fortunate. Ivone, a Russian lady, admitted that she never talks to the union. She said "me never talk to the union, what for, me no understand union and me no English, very poor".

Lack of common language hindering communication between workers and their union was not the only factor in poor union-member relations. For instance, Vivian, an Italian, said "I never talk to the union since I have worked for twenty-six years. I have no reason why I should talk to them, they no help". Gina, a Mauritian lady, who understood English said "Union is bullshit, they only talk a lot, but they never help us". It seems that the assumption that the union was not useful was a generally held opinion. It was the reason expressed by many workers as to why they did not want to attend union meetings conducted outside the factory. The majority of workers were members of the union only because it was compulsory and they resented being forced to belong and pay dues to an organisation they regarded as useless. It was obvious that the members were influenced by the incongruity between what the union promised and what it was able to deliver. Latterly the reduced bargaining power caused by the recession had intensified the members' negative attitudes and any previous achievements by the union were eclipsed by their current lack of negotiating strength due to the recession and the refusal by their members to seriously support the unions activities.

The situation in this factory cannot be used as a basis for simplistic generalisation, because other studies have shown that migrants were extremely militant. Nor can an exploration of the low militancy be reduced to gender as has been argued by Mather (1982). There are other factors, such as those given above, which affect the passivity/militancy of migrant factory workers, whether they be male or female. One should consider the degree of management 'oppression' and the penetration of management control ideologies.

However, we can clearly conclude that union power in the 'Bravo' factory has been very effectively degraded. The more powerful position of the employer has been the significant factor in influencing the workers. Another important factor is the international links which have enabled the management of this firm to compare their experiences in other plants and learn from these experiences. The declining power of unions and the greater power of globalisation reduces the differences between female factory workers in advanced and developing countries.

## E. CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that unions have contributed to the improvement of the conditions of female workers. They have protected workers' rights and made some gains which range from increasing pay-rates to improving working conditions. The unions' power to negotiate with employers, however, is not fixed; it may decrease or increase depending on certain circumstances. In the Post-Moulding department, the union's power has experienced a decline due to recession. The inability of the union to protect

some workers from dismissal was one example of the union's limitations in maintaining its strength. The strike as a weapon to undermine the power of the employer was more often than not an ineffective weapon. This was observable through management's ability to ask workers to work overtime after strikes. This action by workers has been criticised by the shop stewards. However, the shop stewards' attitude towards this happening were often contradictory because they also shared the experience of alienation. The shop stewards also worked overtime after strikes.

The lack of understanding of the union's mission which was mainly caused by ineffective communication was a fundamental element in discouraging workers to be co-operative with the union. A combination of the workers' fear of losing jobs due to the high unemployment and the effective control of management over the workers were also significant reasons for the impotence of union strategies. Due to these complications, it could be said that the workers tended to be on the side of management rather than the union.

The following chapter will now look in more detail at the management's ability to control workers through interpersonal control, formal control, and the creation of fear. These practices have all undermined the power of union.

## CHAPTER V DYNAMICS OF CONTROL AND WORKER RELATIONS

### A. INTRODUCTION

This chapter raises several issues. Firstly, it examines how management's strategies of labour control have affected migrant women workers. I consider four important forms of control in the Post-Moulding department. They are: interpersonal controls, the system of work, bureaucratic controls and the creation of fear. A combination of these controls results in the workers' subordination. Caught in a restructure regime of control, workers have created their own strategies for survival. In addition, this chapter examines the patterns of relationships among the workers, and the system of recruitment and promotion which can affect workers' feelings of satisfaction on their jobs. Workers were generally aware that their jobs were boring. I will examine how the workers convert this boredom into an enjoyable time. The jokes ranging from sexual to racial topics have become customary to some extent. Humour, joking, and other diversions were effective strategies to escape from pressure. Finally, this chapter examines how the particular conditions, such as recession, or the profitability of the firm, have affected workers' attitude towards occupational mobility and job security.

### B. CONTROL MECHANISMS

Game and Pringle cite from Edwards (1979) who classifies three forms of control:

*First, there is simple control which is direct and personal and where power is invested in individuals, for example, the 'entrepreneur'. Secondly, there is technical control, where the control mechanism is designed into the machine and technology [which] paces and directs work. And thirdly, there is bureaucratic control, where control is embedded in the social organisation of the enterprise through the use of rules, procedures, job descriptions and evaluations (1983:20).*

These three forms clearly existed in this factory, although there are some dissimilarities. The following section, will discuss the control mechanisms and its boundaries in the 'Bravo' factory.

#### (i) Interpersonal Control

It has been widely argued that interpersonal control became ineffective once modern control mechanisms developed in industry. Sennett (1980:84-121) "suggests we have moved towards subtler forms of

control through indifference and impersonality rather than through direct intervention" (Game and Pringle, 1983:21). However, I found in the 'Bravo' factory that paternalistic interpersonal control remained important. There has developed a patron-client relationship between the management, particularly between the forewoman and workers. These are the effective control mechanisms used to control the workers, and they rely significantly on interpersonal force of personality as a supplement to the formal bureaucratic hierarchy of the workforce.

*(a) Paternalistic Control*

In order to encourage workers to work productively and efficiently, management has deliberately tried to create a climate of harmonious relationships through the creation of a paternalistic atmosphere, and paternalistic expectations among the workers. The paternalistic strategy devised by management is analogous to creating an atmosphere of family life in the factory. For example, all women workers, regardless of their age or how many children they had, were always called 'girl' by the manager or other supervisors. The analogy to family here is that the 'girls' were expected to behave like girls in a family, to remain submissive to men but also to be protected by men. This is a strategy which is practised widely within companies (see for instance, Westwood, 1984: 24-25). Mather (1982) suggests that although women have been incorporated in the factory, they are still controlled by men. There has been a transformation of control from that of the fathers or husbands in the home to the male bosses in the factory.

Another example of the use of the family life analogy occurs at farewell functions given to those who were leaving the factory after working for a period of four years or more. The manager's speech always began with the words "we are family here...". This, it might be proposed, established bit-by-bit in the workers' minds that factory life was just like family life. The repetition of the word 'family' could be expected to encourage the workers to think that they were really like a family. The bosses and the other workers also gave farewell presents to those leaving. Roberto, Fransisco, and Wiji, for instance, had been given presents<sup>71</sup>. On their last day at work, the manager would take workers, particularly male workers<sup>72</sup> who were leaving to a restaurant. When Roberto retired from the factory, David, the manager, took him to a restaurant after a farewell party on the shopfloor. The management's attention to those who were

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<sup>71</sup> Everybody who worked in a section usually contributed money. One or two co-workers would buy presents, such as a radio cassette player, or an electric fry pan, at the electronic factory located behind the 'Bravo' factory.

<sup>72</sup> Based on my observation, David did not take female workers to a restaurant when they were leaving the factory. For instance, David did not take Wiji to a restaurant.

leaving was expected to engender a rise in positive feelings by the workers toward the company presumably to compensate for those times when management did not treat the workers as if they were real family.

Another feature of the paternalistic strategy was the way in which the manager approached workers. Everytime he walked around the factory floor, he would make jokes with some, particularly the European workers, often clapping them on the shoulder, saying "good girl, work hard". Instead of pointing to workers with his finger to ask them to work harder and faster, the manager would smile and hold the workers' shoulders while he exhorted them to work harder and faster. The manager's attitude however, was not constant. Sometimes when exhorting workers to work harder and faster to reach a particular target he would be quite rude.

These contradictory tactics of the manager left ambivalent feelings among the workers, many of whom were conscious that they were being manipulated. Some workers consistently saw the factory milieu as if it were family life, because of bosses' treatment and because of their relationship with other workers, particularly with those who were culturally similar, or those they had known for a long time. Most of the European workers, who were the principal beneficiaries of the manager's benign treatment, had been working in the factory longer than other groups. It is understandable they had a better relationship with the factory and the manager than did the others. Some workers, who initially stated positive feelings toward the workplace, would later make contradictory statements. For example, sometimes they considered this factory as the best workplace they had ever worked. Later they complained to me about the manager's treatment. Moreover, they indicated they thought the manager's regular attitude might be a technique for concealing poor treatment towards them.

Some groups of non-Italian workers clearly recognized that there was discrimination. If the factory was pretending to be a family, these workers perceived themselves as being treated as if they were 'step'-children, whilst the others were being treated like 'true' children. The manager was perceived to be prejudiced against non-European, particularly Asian, workers. He pointed out to me in an interview that, in his experience, Europeans were more adaptable, they assimilated more easily, by contrast to the Asians who seemed to only enjoy having contact with their own people. Moreover, he emphasised that this Asian attitude had built a barrier to creating relationships.

This paternalistic tactic was not the only interpersonal method used by the manager<sup>73</sup> to establish control over the workers. There existed other approaches. One of them was the creation of a patron-client relationships between the bosses and the workers.

*(b) Patron-client Relationships*

The development of patron-client relationships occurred both in the Paint-Shop and the Auto-Assembly. This has become an important form of control over the workers. How it worked can be seen as follows.

The most striking example of the use of patron-client ties of personal dependence in the factory was the situation that existed between the forewoman, Gabriella, and workers in the Paint-Shop. The forewoman is a very important figure in the Paint-Shop; she was perceived to have influence beyond her formal position in the company hierarchy, and the workers were reliant on her. Most of the workers, regardless of sex, believed they had a good relationship with this forewoman. By comparison with other management and supervisory personnel<sup>74</sup>, the forewoman was the most popular. The good relationships she formed with the workers were based on both her work practices and her personal approach.

In my time in the factory I never saw her being rude in dealing with the workers. In the Paint-Shop I not only worked with her, but also with Suzanne and Marcelle (two Italian leading-hands). When the forewoman, Gabriella, asked someone to do something she did not show her power as forewoman, unlike Suzanne and Marcelle who tended to order the workers around as if they were the 'big boss'<sup>75</sup>. The latter attitude often had disastrous results. When my work was to pack water containers from Suzanne's room, Suzanne insisted I work very fast, because David (a manager) was going to check and count the finished materials. Suzanne's way of directing me was to say: "pack 100 pieces of this (she pointed to the water containers) in each cardboard, quick." She would check my work several times, ordering me to work faster each time. I was required to count and pack the water containers at the same time. Suzanne's interruption, which was intended to get a faster result, in fact disturbed my work and as a result, I often forgot the number that I had already counted

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<sup>73</sup> The general manager also expected the creation of harmonious relationships between management and workers built through direct relationships (see 'The Relationship: Between the Ideal and the Real' section in chapter VI for more detailed information).

<sup>74</sup> The other figures included manager, supervisor, leading-hands and shop stewards.

<sup>75</sup> The workers named the general manager as 'big boss'. They facetiously called someone who was over-acting by the same title.



and I could not pack the materials properly<sup>76</sup>. I often had to repeat the process. Other workers reported similar experiences, particularly when packing and counting. The constant interruptions annoyed them as well as giving them feelings of insecurity because of the repeated mistakes.

Although Gabriella had a higher position than Suzanne, she did not continually exhort workers to work harder and harder. Some workers often commented that Gabriella was not a person who enjoyed discriminating against others.

Workers were indebted to Gabriella because it was she who would arrange for their families/relatives/friends to be employed as casual workers during the long summer school vacation when the factory employed extra labour as casuals. Stanley (a Supervisor), commented: "during school holidays it is usually like a family reunion here." Whilst I worked at the factory it was quiet and only a few workers had asked Gabriella for a job for their families<sup>77</sup>.

Some of the workers, particularly Italians, told me that if they had a personal problem, they would talk to Gabriella about it and ask her for advice. They considered her a person who would keep a confidence. These kind of ties can clearly be used to control workers.

Similarly, in the Auto-Assembly, the leading-hand, Sophia, was trusted by the majority of workers. I found only one person who was disappointed with Sophia<sup>78</sup>. In actual fact Vivian was not the only person moved to the Paint-Shop. Another who also remained in the Paint-Shop expressed feelings of admiration for Sophia saying, "[Sophia] is good person, I reckon she is the best boss." It was partly because of her kindness that the workers tended to comply with Sophia's orders. It is clear that the quality of direct personal relations can be an important supplement to genuinely effective control of workers by supervisory staff and line management.

If in the Paint-Shop it could be argued that Gabriella's power was built to a significant extent on an ethnic bond, this could not be argued in the Auto-Assembly area. Sophia was the only Yugoslav, so it seems that her character was the reason for the workers' dependence.

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<sup>76</sup> The packing job required that a cardboard box be filled with 100 water containers. One had to be careful how one put them inside, otherwise the cardboard box would not be big enough.

<sup>77</sup> Four workers, out of a total six casual workers, were re-employed, approximately one month after they were dismissed. The remaining two were sons of Italian workers.

<sup>78</sup> Vivian, a worker who had been transferred to the Paint-Shop, blamed Sophia for the move. Vivian had been told by Sophia she was only going to be moved for three days, but she remained in the Paint-Shop for many months. Vivian felt Sophia had gone back on her word. Sophia stated that the decision to leave Vivian in the Paint-Shop had been made by the manager.

The workers' dependence on their direct boss, unconsciously caused anxiety towards anything outside the immediate environment. Most workers in the Auto-Assembly thought that worker relations within the Paint-Shop were not good and that the bosses were not nice. This was partly based on lack of knowledge because most workers spent only a few days at a time in the Paint-Shop.

Therefore, in the 'Bravo' factory, interpersonal relationships between the bosses and the workers were effective to an important degree in controlling workers. In addition, the dependence on their bosses by workers discouraged active unionism and reinforced their suspicion of outsiders. It appears the combination of these factors helped effective control of the workforce.

## (ii) System of Work

The development of technology has facilitated the introduction of machinery whose speed and productivity can be and is continuously monitored. These machines have brought about technical control of workers by forcing particular systems of work on them. Each system of work exerts a different intensity of control over the workers. In this section, I propose to discuss the way in which technical control was exerted over workers in this factory.

In the Paint-Shop, an automatic machine to paint material has been installed. Workers on this machine are required to keep up with the speed of the machine. Three workers were usually allocated to this automatic machine. While one worker fed unpainted articles into the machine the other two collected the completed painted articles and packed them in boxes. These two workers not only had to adapt to the speed of the machine, they also had to adjust to the first worker's speed in loading the unpainted articles. Yeo, a Malaysian Chinese man, was usually allocated the position of feeding in the unpainted articles. Part of the duties of this position was to check the work of the machine from time to time. The control over the workers of this automatic machine was intense, not only because of the technical control exerted by the machine itself, but also because of its location just below the manager's office which ensured the workers assigned to the automatic machine always worked diligently<sup>79</sup>.

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<sup>79</sup> The manager could observe the workers assigned to this machine and he often came out and ordered them to work faster. When I worked on the automatic machine whilst interviewing Martha, David, the manager warned the workers that they were working too slowly. Yeo kept silent in response to his warning and Martha became very anxious. A few minutes later I was called away by Gabriella, the forewoman. She asked me to help her package the samples that must be sent away that day. The next day, Martha asked me why I was called away by Gabriella. She thought that it was related to David's warning. She was relieved when I told her that Gabriella called me away to do a different job.

Another system of work which exerted control was the classic 'Fordist' chain, or assembly-line, type. The technology has made possible a fragmentation of the labour process so that no worker is responsible for a full operation within a job. Each worker in a section completed a small part of the total task. This continuous passing on of an object to the next worker meant that workers controlled each other within the chain. For instance, on the production line, two male spray-painters painted materials and one, or two, female workers checked, cleaned and counted the objects after they had been painted. Counting was a key activity which allowed the female workers to regulate the pace of work for the male spray-workers. To illustrate this point, Effie, who checked and cleaned the end products, would count the results of the day's work at 3.p.m. She would also compare the results with the previous two days tallies, commenting adversely to the spray-painters if the tally did not equal or better the previous tallies. The effectiveness of this pacing can be observed in a block of daily results for Wu, one of the spray painters. His output over several days in March were:- 13th March: a hundred and five pieces of Mitsubishi plate; 14th March: a hundred and twenty; 15th March: a hundred and thirty; 18th March: a hundred and thirty five; 19th March: seventy for a half day; 20th March: a hundred and thirty five pieces. When his output tallies slipped back Effie would say "look you did not paint a lot today. What's the matter with you?". The criticism was an effective albeit subtle form of control. Alternatively the male workers also controlled the female workers in this section because the females could not leave the line without asking the males to have someone replace them.

Another important example of the chain work system was in Marcelle's room (Marcelle is a leading hand in the smallest room in the Paint-Shop). Six or seven workers worked in a circle. The first worker took the material<sup>80</sup> from the box to put in a nail. This object was then passed to the next person who carried out another simple operation. In this way the object moved from person to person in the circle until it reached the last person who checked, cleaned and packed it. In this situation each worker had to adjust to the other workers' speed of work.

It is clear from the above examples that the technical organisation of the labour process in systems of work is another form of control over the workers' productivity.

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<sup>80</sup> The type of material used was not the same each day. The choice of material depended on the priority of the order.

### (iii) Bureaucratic Control

Bureaucratic type control can be identified by rigid job descriptions, boundaries of responsibility, supervising practices and the techniques used for quality control. This bureaucratic type of control is clearly observable in the 'Bravo' factory.

The formal job descriptions of each level of management made clear their responsibility to exercise control over the workers. I will use the Paint-Shop and Auto-Assembly departments to illustrate the methods they used.

In each department, managers of every grade had responsibilities which effectively controlled the activities of workers. Even the location and physical layout of the manager's office was an effective supervisory tool. The office was situated on the right-hand side of the

Paint-Shop and the walls were mounted on all sides by one-way mirrors. It was set a level higher than the work floor so that the manager inside had uninterrupted vision of the work place. The mirrored walls meant he could observe the workers without being seen and could also continue doing other tasks at his desk. This meant the workers had no idea when they were being observed, or if the manager was in his office: thus a straightforward use of Foucault's (or Bentham's) 'panopticon' principle. The effectiveness of these physical arrangements as a means of control was evident in the workers' dislike of being assigned to the Paint-Shop. They particularly disliked being placed under the manager's office. At times when the Paint-Shop needed additional workers, those moved there from the Auto-Assembly would say they were being moved to 'hell'.

The dislike of being observed made the workers very conscious of whether the manager was 'in' or not. If he was not 'in' they would feel free to chat to other workers and not to work very fast. They would tell each other happily "[David] is not 'in' today".

However, David was aware of this because he developed a habit of walking around the Auto-Assembly and the Paint-Shop, the two sections for which he was responsible, checking on the workers. The workers realised this and continuously checked their surroundings for him.

Although the manager's control over the workers was strict, the workers were adept at using the time when he was not around watching for their own pursuits. For instance, the bosses always had their coffee break at 3.p.m, so some of the workers also used this chance to take a coffee break. Theresa and Danni, for instance, after checking around to see that the coast was clear, would make and drink hot coffee whenever the bosses were away at the canteen. They laughingly said "we are clever, the bosses have coffee, we have coffee too." They went so far as to keep their cups in a hidden place. They appeared proud of their ability to cheat. Jennifer's action was similar. Almost everyday, Jennifer brought fruits, such as watermelons, oranges or apples to work and in the middle of

working hours, would distribute it to other workers nearby. They also would check around for the bosses, and surreptitiously start eating. Jennifer and her friends were just as delighted that Theresa and Danni could succeed in cheating the bosses at coffee-time.

However, workers were not only controlled by the manager, they also had a supervisor, a forewoman and a leading-hand checking on their work. The power of these other managerial staff was not necessarily uniform, as will be seen in the following section.

Within the formal bureaucratic hierarchy, the second most important person after the manager in these sections was the supervisor. Although these sections were predominantly staffed by female workers, the supervisor was a male. He came from Singapore where he had worked in the Singapore branch of the firm and had been working at the factory in Melbourne for approximately ten years. The two most important tasks of the supervisor were to look after the technical problems of all the workers and to direct the workers' jobs. If the workers were not sure whether aspects of the job ( for instance, the appearance of the material) were technically right or not, they needed to check with him. If the forewoman or leading-hand could not solve a technical problem for a worker, they were required to take the matter to the supervisor. Other types of problems were handled by the forewoman/leading-hand and the manager. Although the supervisor was more senior than the forewoman in the formal hierarchy, the *de facto* power of the supervisor was in many ways less than the forewoman.

The supervisor was also responsible for maintaining the diligence of the workers. He would criticise the workers if he saw them not doing the job properly, or not working diligently. The workers however, did not take what he told them seriously. They had more respect for Gabriella, the forewoman, than they had for him.

The forewoman was formally the next most senior person to the supervisor, and was selected from the shop floor. Management required her to have experience, skill, diligence and English fluency. The tasks of a forewoman were to distribute the jobs to the workers; to control the work of the workers; to give a report to the manager regarding the workers' efficiency and their output. The forewoman, Gabriella, handled most of the issues because of her closeness to, and direct involvement with, the workers. It was her duty to pass on commands formally to all workers, except to the male spray-painters who were under the supervisor's control. Nevertheless, the forewoman sometimes gave orders to the spray-painters, who would often ask her for direction regarding a particular job. The tasks within this section were varied in terms of the equipment used, the degree of difficulty of the task, and the degree of concentration needed. Because of these factors it was impossible to distribute the job equally to each worker. Some workers would have heavier jobs than others. Therefore to avoid

workers constantly having repetitive or heavy tasks, with the resulting physical stress to the body, the rotation of tasks system was employed by management<sup>81</sup>.

In order to get the best quality of production, it was important for the forewoman to understand each worker's ability when assigning jobs. She recognised that not everybody understood all the jobs and that workers had different abilities in carrying out tasks. For instance, Jennifer and Patricia as well as Vicki were better at glue-spraying than anyone else, with some workers admitting they could not do that particular job. Gabriella's knowledge of each workers' ability effectively advanced control over the quality of workers' production, because it reduced the possibility of rejects.

In the Paint-Shop, the forewoman was assisted by three female leading-hands. Like the forewoman, these leading-hands were selected from the shop floor for their experience, diligence, skills, hard-work, and fluency in English. Instead of controlling a particular group of workers, each leading-hand had a particular location under her authority. The tasks of the leading-hands were to help the forewoman and to assign the various jobs to the workers within her location. They were also required to do whatever tasks for which there was no worker or the one no one else wished to do. Therefore, she was required to understand all the jobs. A leading-hand replaced the forewoman when she was absent.

Often the role of the leading-hand was clear, but sometimes their roles were confused with that of the forewoman. Often, a worker did not want to be instructed by the leading-hand to do a job even though the job was under the jurisdiction of the leading-hand. The workers would tend to listen for the forewoman's instruction rather than that of leading-hand. The workers could also ask the leading-hand when they had problems with the jobs, or needed something related to the job. However, it seemed that their job description and that of the forewoman overlapped. For instance, the distribution of jobs to the workers would be conducted by both of them. The forewoman had the right to direct all the workers, while the leading-hands could also direct them, within locations under their control. This resulted in a dilemma for the workers who were placed in the position of deciding whether to follow the direction of the forewoman or that of the leading-hand. Both the forewoman and leading-hand would interpret it as a sign of disrespect if the workers did not obey them. There was a tendency for the workers to obey the forewoman rather than the leading-hand. This may have been due to the leading-hand not being directly responsible for these particular workers but rather looking after the work within a particular location. It was also because the forewoman

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<sup>81</sup> See the 'Rotation of Work' section.

had a higher position of authority, and more experience, because she had worked longer in the factory. Perhaps the most important reason was due to the workers (both Italians and non-Italians) regarding the forewoman as having a better personality than the leading-hand<sup>82</sup>.

The authority of the leading-hand was not always accepted by the workers as illustrated by the following story. One day during my field work a leading-hand, Marcelle, was working on a 'line' which required a specific number of workers. This meant there always had to be a spare worker to replace someone on the 'line' if necessary. One of the girls working on the line requested permission to go to the toilet and the 'spare', Yulia, was directed by Marcelle to replace her. Yulia, who was working on a task allocated to her by Gabriella, the forewoman, shouted that she would only obey Gabriella's instructions. In this case Gabriella countermanded Marcelle by instructing Yulia to remain at the task she was engaged on and to disregard Marcelle's instruction.

However, the overlap of responsibility between the forewoman and the leading-hand, was usually beneficial and resulted in better quality control. The leading-hand assisted the forewoman by recognising workers' abilities.

Unlike the Paint-Shop, where there were three leading-hands, the Auto-Assembling section had only one leading-hand, Sophia, a Yugoslav. Sophia would assign tasks to each worker and would herself do the task which no one else liked. When five workers in this section were retrenched, the trolley boy was moved to the Paint-Shop, so Sophia replaced him by pushing the trolley to the workers.

Of the four leading-hands employed in the Paint-Shop and Auto-Assembly, Sophia had the highest degree of authority to control the workers in her section. Her authority was comparable to the forewoman's in the Paint-Shop. This circumstance was caused by many reasons, the most significant being the absence of a forewoman in this section.

It is clear from the above that the way in which management defined job descriptions was to ensure that the work in the factory would run smoothly. The way in which the quality control section of the 'Bravo' factory operated is an example of how both 'job description' and procedures interacted to govern the working life of the workers.

Two people from the quality control section, the auditors, Marlon (a Frenchman) and Nicole (an Australian), controlled the quality of the workers' output by checking the finished products. Every day Marlon and Nicole came to the Paint-Shop and Auto-Assembly to do a quality control check. They did not check all the products in each box, rather they randomly selected from the top or second layer of the box because it was

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<sup>82</sup> This is described in the patron-client section above.

impossible for two people to check all the finished articles. They would compare the finished products with a prototype which indicated which parts of the finished products required concentrated checking. There were times when the quality control check was carried out in the store section. When the auditors finished checking, they would put a sticker on each box to indicate that the articles had been checked. Other workers in Despatch re-checked all articles before they were sent out. If Marlon and Nicole found that the articles were not of a satisfactory standard they returned them to the Paint-Shop or Auto-Assembly marked with a 'rework' label<sup>83</sup>. All employees, regardless of position, did not like to be checked and controlled. David, the manager, for instance, often asked Gabriella suspiciously about Marlon's checking. "What is [Marlon] doing there?" was a routine question from David to Gabriella. David, as the manager, was responsible for the jobs in his section. Both David and Gabriella were not pleased to see 'rework' boxes.

When 'reworking' was required it was usually returned to the last worker involved. This did not always mean that it was the last worker's fault, it could have been due to a mistake made by previous workers. This resulted in sections blaming each other when articles were returned. For example Post Moulding workers (the Paint-Shop and Auto-Assembly Workers) and Moulding section workers would blame each other for inadequate work. Blame was not only addressed to individual workers, but also towards the machines. Sometimes, workers within the same section would blame each other<sup>84</sup>. Workers were very frightened if they received a 'rework' box. Jennifer on receiving a 'rework' box often said, "[Gabriella] is going to kill me."

The workers were so scared of getting 'rework' they would cheat by hiding imperfect articles in the bottom of the box because they knew that Marlon and Nicole only checked the top or the second layer. By cheating in this manner the workers knew the faults would not be found until after the goods left the factory. When I worked with Gabriella, in order not to make a mistake, I was very careful to ask her to check my work again to see whether the work was good or not. When I asked her about an article that I was sure was a little bit scratched, she told me to put it in the bottom of the box, rather than put it in the 'reject' box. She was amused at my confusion and said "we are clever, [Marlon] won't see them, he won't

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<sup>83</sup> 'Rework' meant the finished materials were not satisfactory and needed to be worked again.

<sup>84</sup> One day Suzanne received a 'rework' box from Dispatch. She told Gabriella that the mistake was not due to the workers in her section even though it was clear the 'rework' was required due to an imperfect connection of two materials which could only occur from a machine in Suzanne's section. Suzanne insisted that Moulding produced inferior materials and that other workers in other section made mistakes.



check the bottom of the box." She was laughing and repeated this 'joke' to Jennifer and Patricia who worked close by us. She, then, said 'bravo!'<sup>85</sup>. Other workers did the same, hiding the articles at the bottom of the box.

Evaluation of production was continually improved by management. When I first commenced fieldwork, workers did not know how many boxes they had completed each day. They were not asked to tally their production. This system changed about the middle of my fieldwork. Workers were then required to tally their production every time they finished the job<sup>86</sup>. After approximately one month of the introduction of this new rule the workers still have not got used to it. In the short term, this type of control is not effective. Martha, for instance, was very upset when Gabriella instructed her to tally and name the articles she had completed on the form that had been provided by the factory. Martha asked me to do this because she could not write in English. Similar experiences occurred with other workers who were in the same position of not being able to write in English. This system may become effective in the long run as the workers find ways of adjusting to it.

#### (iv) The Creation of Fear

The recession, current economic factors and market competition are all used as weapon to exercise control over workers. These reasons were used when the 'vulnerable' position of the factory was broadcast to the workers to exhort them to become good workers and not blame the factory if the work situation deteriorated. These reasons certainly affected the more vulnerable workers, the older ones with limited English.

In the Paint-Shop and Auto-Assembly, the manager, supervisor, forewoman, and leading-hands, often gave information to the workers which demonstrated the vulnerable position of the 'Bravo' factory to market fluctuation. They also stressed to the workers that competition among the suppliers was quite fierce. For instance, Stanley said, "There are many suppliers here. We have to maintain our quality, otherwise we are going to lose the orders". A second source of this type of propaganda was the company newsletter, which was distributed roughly every three months<sup>87</sup>. The majority of the workers, about 95 per cent, believed the factory was completely dependent upon the motor car manufacturing

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<sup>85</sup> The Italian workers would always shout out 'bravo!' when they were amused at something.

<sup>86</sup> Sometimes, in the middle of one job, workers were changed to another job because of its urgency. They were then required to note how many articles they had completed.

<sup>87</sup> The newsletter was not as effective a means of distributing management propaganda as the information spread by the 'middle management' staff, principally because few workers read it. Most newsletters were glanced at and then thrown into the rubbish bin, either out of disinterest, or through lack of English language skills.

companies. They also believed there was great competition among the suppliers and they had an obligation to maintain the quality of the components. It was clear their ideas were influenced by the strategy of management. In actual fact, they did not know whether there were other suppliers who produced the same components as they did.

What the management told the workers was not always true. Contradictory circumstances often occurred which made this obvious. A large number of workers were dismissed, because, management said, there was a decline in the number of jobs available. However, after they were dismissed the number of jobs did not decline. The workers soon realised that they were being forced to work harder. Where a task had required two workers in the past now a single worker was required to do the same job. Workers were now working much faster, many were afraid to talk to me because talking would decelerate their work. I now found it very difficult to approach workers. I was rejected by Nelly, who said "please don't talk to me. Look I have plenty of work. If I cannot finish it [David] will be angry with me". This complaint I understood because I found myself working much faster, particularly when I worked in Suzanne's section. It appears the recession or economic slowdown has been used as a useful control over workers by management.

### C. PATTERN OF RELATIONSHIPS AMONG WORKERS

In this section I am going to describe the types of relationships established among the different ethnic groups of workers. Three types of relationship patterns were discernible: (i) harmonious, (ii) hidden competition and (iii) conflicting. These relationship patterns were characterised by and originated from very different phenomena. Whilst there were some similarities in the patterns of relationships in the Auto-Assembly and the Paint-Shop, there were also differences.

#### (i) Harmonious Relationships

Manifestations of harmony among workers took similar forms in both the Paint-Shop and the Auto-Assembly. The important feature of this similarity was the existence of a number of small groups of workers who met regularly at lunch-times<sup>88</sup>. Membership of each group was fixed, except for Wiji, a Srilankan from the Paint-Shop who sometimes lunched in the canteen and sometimes lunched in the work area and those people who had something else to do that day<sup>89</sup>. In both work areas, the groups

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<sup>88</sup> The exception was Effie, a Greek, who preferred not to join a group.

<sup>89</sup> Sometimes workers used their lunch break for shopping at the 'Kambrook' factory which sold 'seconds' electronics, or went shopping to the Huntingdale shops approximately five minutes walk from the factory.

divided into two eating location patterns; they either ate in the work area or in canteen. All male workers lunched in the canteen, except for Roberto who often went to the Huntingdale shops. In the Paint-Shop, there were nine groups of female workers, five of whom lunched in the work area, the rest lunching in the canteen. Four of the five groups who lunched in the work area were composed of Italian workers. On occasion Wiji joined the fifth group. During lunch-time these groups spoke Italian with the group members sharing their food with their group co-member. At special times<sup>90</sup> they shared food with the other groups. There was a bond among the workers in each group that was not always the same between one group and another. For instance, Theresa, Danni and Martha who were in the same group, often shared their food with each other<sup>91</sup>. Effie always ate alone in the corner of the main room of the Paint-Shop reading a Greek newspaper. She said she enjoyed being alone:

*I don't like to talk rubbish things<sup>92</sup>. Besides, we cannot trust each other anymore. Today, they may become our friends, but tomorrow they will do something terrible for us. It doesn't bother me at all being alone.*

Generally the bonds among members of a group were strong, not only because of the ethnic bond, but also because many were kin<sup>93</sup>.

Unlike the above pattern, the groups that lunched in the canteen contained people of different ethnic backgrounds<sup>94</sup>. Each group member usually ate their own food, only occasionally offering food to each other, except for the second group who shared their fruit every day. Sometimes some group members bought food from the canteen. Each group had their

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<sup>90</sup> If someone had a party, she would bring the left-over food and offer it to different groups. If someone brought a lot of fruit from her own garden, she distributed the fruit both inside and outside her group. Several times Marcelle brought a lot of figs and distributed them to many workers outside her group.

<sup>91</sup> Danni usually brought breads or biscuits, tomatoes, fruits (sometimes oranges, or apples, or bananas, or grapes). Theresa brought breads or biscuits and cucumbers and fruit, while Martha, often brought biscuits, lettuces, and fruit. They usually did not share the breads or biscuits, but they did share the tomatoes, cucumber, lettuce and the fruit (they shared the fruit only if they brought a different type of fruit).

<sup>92</sup> She was critical of Italian workers who often made 'dirty' jokes. The role of bawdy humour will be discussed in the 'Factory Sub-Culture' section below.

<sup>93</sup> For instance, Kelly was Patricia's older sister. Josephine was Gabriella's niece.

<sup>94</sup> For instance, the first group consisted of two Mauritian, one Russian and two Italians. The second group consisted of one Yugoslavian and two Greeks. The third consisted of one Polynesian, one Italian and one Australian. The fourth group was a group of young workers and consisted of one Maltese, two Italians, and sometimes one Sri Lankan male worker.

'own' table, which had not changed location for years and years. The indication of their ties was not based upon the sharing of food but it was often clear in their expressions of caring for each other. For instance, if Lolo (who was a widow with one son) complained about money, Katherine would encourage her to ask for overtime work. Katherine was not reluctant to ask Gabriella for overtime for Lolo, explaining to Gabriella about Lolo's circumstances.

In the Auto-Assembly, there were two groups where membership crossed ethnic lines. One group preferred to lunch in the work area and the other group lunched in the canteen. All workers in the Auto-Assembly were close to each other, whether they lunched together or not. This closeness was due to a number of factors. They were a small number of workers who worked in a small area where they could see and talk to each other. Their relationships were more harmonious<sup>95</sup> than were those of the workers from the Paint-Shop. This was recognized by most of the workers who had been moved to the Paint-Shop or by those who were moved there for short periods. Vivian and Dorothy expressed their dissatisfaction at being moved to the Paint-Shop, because they said they missed the better work relationships which existed among the Auto-Assembly workers. Cheong<sup>96</sup>, who had the same experience, did not even want to talk to other workers in the Paint-Shop. He said:

*Over there [the Auto-Assembly] most of the workers are good, I like them all. But here I don't like them, they are different. They like to talk behind your back.*

Similar to the situation in the Auto-Assembly section, Cavendish (1982) also found that the atmosphere in the factory where she worked, was warm and supportive. She pointed out that friendliness among workers was automatic due to the fact that they shared the same fate. As she said " ...you were all in the same boat, doing the same work in the same place" (Cavendish, 1982:56). However, she noticed that in certain circumstances, the warmth disappeared. For example, when the workers were depressed and had to work very fast, they were 'ratty' with each other (Cavendish, 1982:57). The dynamic pattern of relationships also existed in the 'Bravo' factory in which covert competitive and conflicting relationships were there.

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<sup>95</sup> See the 'Factory Sub-Culture' section for further discussion regarding their relationships.

<sup>96</sup> He used to be a trolley boy in the Auto-Assembly section.

## (ii) Covert Competitive Relationships

The mood of solidarity and harmony among workers was coloured by undercurrents of competition, sometimes open, more often unspoken and hidden. The types of competition varied from personal one-up-manship to work-based competitiveness. On the personal level, the source of competition might be clothes, shoes, cosmetics, cars and so forth. In the Paint-Shop workers wore a dark blue uniform over the top of their dresses. At the end of their shift they removed the uniform. They not only took the uniform off but many also changed their shoes, from the flat, covered type required by factory regulation to fashion high-heeled types. It was at change time that some workers took the opportunity to show off their clothes and shoes. This unspoken one-up-manship was recognized by other workers. Kate, expressing her feelings said: "competition clearly happens, they [about the workers who enjoyed dressing-up] like to show-off their wealth." One-up-manship was only played by a few workers<sup>97</sup> and appeared to be stimulated by advertisements. For instance, Josephine (Gabriella's niece) promoted AVON and AMWAY products at breaks, spreading the catalogues out for the other workers to peruse. Those interested could purchase items through her. This stimulated hidden competition among the workers, because some regarded clothes, jewellery, and cosmetics as a symbol of their wealth, which they saw as elevating their status.

This hidden competition was more discernable when the workers discussed the price they paid for their shoes, clothes and so forth. It was obvious that it created envious feelings in other workers who were not able to afford such luxuries.

The undercurrent of competition among some workers was also discernable when it came to work-related matters, particularly those influencing promotion. When the management announced they intended to select the leading-hand's<sup>98</sup>. Wiji, said:

*some Italian workers, like [Marcelle], have an ambition to be the leading-hand. Actually, at that time, [David] asked me to be the leading-hand in [Marcelle]'s room. But, I don't want to take the position.*

Dorothy, also pointed out that a few workers who desired to be admired by the bosses competed with each other.

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<sup>97</sup> Some workers, supporting families alone, admitted that they could not afford to compete.

<sup>98</sup> This will be discussed in more detail in the 'Promotion' section.

### (iii) Conflicting Relationships

The assignment and distribution of jobs often became a source of conflict among the workers. A week after the workers' dismissals when those remaining still had deep feelings of insecurity an incident occurred which showed just how sensitive everybody was to inter-personal incidents. Martha, an Italian, who had just finished an assigned job on the automatic machine, required another job<sup>99</sup>. When she asked Gabriella for one, she was given one in the front of Gabriella's table, as Gabriella had noticed no-one was working in that position. This position was actually occupied by Kate, who had left the work table to go to the toilet. Although Kate kept silent when she returned and discovered what had happened, she was very angry that Martha had been given her job. She mumbled: "this is not a joke, this is silly. LookI, if [David] sees me without job, he is going to put me out." She was worried and walked around pretending that 'she was busy' until Gabriella allocated her a different job. Martha felt uncomfortable about what had happened and defended herself to an Italian co-worker, saying: "Anyway it is Kate's fault. Why did she leave the work for so long, if she only went to the toilet."

This incident became a source of conflict and prejudice. Kate thought that Gabriella paid more attention to the Italian workers. Gabriella who was busy had not realised that Kate was working in the place she had assigned to Martha. The problem was that Gabriella had not returned the job to Kate. She had found a job for Martha and allowed Kate to go without a job. Kate felt that Gabriella had rejected her.

The distribution of overtime work was also a source of conflict. When there was a lot of overtime work in the past, the majority of workers had the opportunity of obtaining some. This is no longer the situation and now overtime work is limited. The selection of those to work overtime is based upon the workers' ability to do the job required. Some workers feel they are able to do the job requiring overtime but they are not being chosen to do so. This perceived 'unfair' distribution of overtime work has generated suspicious feelings, but there are also other factors at play.

Evidence for suspicious feelings regarding 'bootlickers', particularly existed in the Paint-Shop. Some workers accused particular workers of being 'snakes' or 'two-faced'. When I worked alongside Wiji, the Srilankan, she whispered to me, and said:

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<sup>99</sup> When a worker completed the job assigned to them they were required to ask their supervisor, forewoman or leading-hand for another job.

*You must be careful of some workers, especially [Suzanne], one of the leading-hands here, she is a 'snake', she will be good only in front of you, but behind you she will talk badly, or even will talk to the boss about bad things about you. I hate her, you will see a discrimination too, if you ask a non-Italian, you will find the same feeling as mine. For me, I don't care any more because I will move out soon, but for others, she is dangerous.*

Similarly, Lolo, a Mauritian, who frequently works in Suzanne's area, also warned me about Suzanne. She said:

*You understand 'two-faced'? Here so many people are 'two-faced', including a leading-hand here, [Suzanne]. She like to smile and to make joke with us, but...*

She stopped talking, looked around before talking again

*Yes she likes to talk behind your back, she is a very dangerous lady, the boss will become angry with us, if she talk badly to him about us. You know, now we are unsafe, we don't know when it is our turn to be sacked. May be one day only a few workers will work here.*

A Chinese man, from Singapore, had similar feelings. He had been moved to the Paint-Shop from the Blow Moulding section (all male staff) because of a shortage of workers there. (This move was ironic because management had just sacked some female workers from that section on the grounds there was not enough work for them and here they were moving workers in. In addition to the Chinese man they also moved in some casual workers). This man, although new to the Paint-Shop, immediately became aware of the disharmony there. Significantly he spoke to me in Indonesian (because he did not want others to understand what he was saying):

*Kamu tahu ular, sini banyak orang seperti ular (Do you know snakes, here there are many workers just like snakes). Sini ada politik (there is a politics here), the big boss is European, the general manager is European too. Do not tell anybody, ok. They only like Italian, or other European workers.*

The above examples indicate that there was suspiciousness and distrust among these particular workers based partly on ethnic difference. These feelings will become stronger as the workers in the factory become more insecure, particularly as workers are sacked with greater frequency.

Feelings of distrust and suspiciousness of fellow workers were felt by some workers in the Auto-Assembly section. Vivian, a quiet Italian lady, was moved to the Paint-Shop and her perception of why she was moved was because she could not get on with her boss, Sophia. She said: "Like and dislike happen here. If the boss likes you, you won't be moved, but if the boss does not like you, you will be the person who will be shifted to the different station."

In the Auto-Assembly section ethnicity was not the source of conflict, there were different factors involved. In the Paint-Shop, ethnicity was an important factor because the majority of the workers were Italians and the ties between them were strong. In the Auto-Assembly the workers were from several different ethnic groups and worked more as one team rather than in small closed groups.

The Auto-Assembly workers sometimes talked about the Paint-Shop workers. Gina, a Mauritian, said: "In the Paint-Shop, Italian workers always fight each other."

The term 'two-faced' was rarely used by Auto-Assembly workers who all appeared to trust each other, except for Vivian who had been a victim of an alienating experience. She did not accuse co-workers of being 'bootlickers', but rather talked about the likes and dislikes of the bosses.

There are variations in the pattern of relationships between the Paint-Shop and Auto-Assembly workers. It seems that the behaviour of a small number of workers is enough to affect the type of relationships between workers.

#### D. RECRUITMENT AND PROMOTION

##### (i) Network System

In advanced countries, workers are mostly recruited through formal procedures of public offer, interview and acceptance characteristic of an open labour market. For instance, in Australia job centres are spread out throughout the cities. Particular newspapers, such as *The Age* in Melbourne also publish daily many pages of classified job advertisements. Cho (1985) noted that women workers in the U.S. electronic factories obtained their jobs through regular market procedures, from a formal agent. Actually, this perception of the regular functioning of an open labour market can be overstated - in these countries informal networks exist, even if they often exploit vulnerable sub-groups to the advantage of 'ethnic entrepreneurs' and other labour brokers.



In this part, I shall discuss the system of recruitment in the 'Bravo' factory, particularly in two of the sections. Most workers, approximately 93 per cent<sup>100</sup>, gained their jobs through the informal network, the rest obtained theirs from job centres or by knocking on the factory's door<sup>101</sup>. In developing countries, the informal network has been widely used (see for instance, Nasution, 1982:175) to recruit workers for the companies. In 'Bravo', workers usually received information about jobs from families, relatives or friends who had already worked there. This was a common practice until recently. If workers hear of job vacancies, they ask Gabriella (the forewoman) whether they can apply for their relatives and friends to work there or not. In the case of job vacancies, Gabriella tells them to take the applicants to attend a formal interview.

Furthermore, this system is not only utilised to recruit permanent workers but it is also being employed to take on casual workers. For instance, in the past, during the long summer holidays, many workers arranged for their relatives and friends to get jobs in the factory as casual workers. Stanley (a supervisor) commented, it resembled a 'family reunion'. Due to the recession, however, this practice has declined. It is only a few workers who continue to gain opportunities in that way.

Perhaps, this method would not be utilised if it did not have its advantages for the company. Stanley as well as Gabriella explicitly mentioned that there are some benefits from its use. What is of significant benefit is that the casual workers have some work experience because they have usually been employed there previously on a casual basis. Both Stanley and Gabriella stated that by taking in new casual workers, either a member of the middle management or an existing worker had to teach them how to do the job. This is seen as contributing to reduced output levels.

Another important feature was that of recalling ex-workers to the factory. The four workers who were recalled by the factory after being sacked for approximately one month, also happened to be part of the informal network. For instance, two of them were Italians who had close relationships with Gabriella and Kelly (female shop steward). One worker was a Polynesian lady who was a girl-friend of John, one of the shop stewards in the Post-Moulding section. After dismissing several workers, the factory was in fact still busy so that it required more workers in order to reach the production target. In this context, the forewoman or the shop stewards were able to suggest to their manager the recruitment of

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<sup>100</sup> This was counted from both the Auto-Assembly and the Paint-Shop.

<sup>101</sup> The worker came directly to the factory and asked for a job. Evange, a Greek lady, for instance, often walked along a road in the front of the factory. Though she was aware that her English was not good, she braved knocking on the factory's door to ask for a job. Because she did not know how to ask for a job, she learned the skill from her friends.

particular ex-workers. This consideration was not based so much on work experience, but on loyalties within the informal network. It was only one person, Finau, who did not have access to these informal links and therefore she reported experiencing different treatment. At the beginning, these workers were told that they would be hired only for two or three weeks. In fact, it was only Finau who was employed for two weeks while the rest of them continued to be employed there up to the time I finished my fieldwork.

Some of the workers who got access to work in this factory in this manner interpreted it as the management's generosity towards them. It seemed likely that this practice was seen by both sides (the management and the workers) as advantageous. The management gained an important benefit from this strategy because it resulted in the workers' obedience to the factory. Control practices, such as advanced technology and bureaucracy, were usefully supplemented by ties of patronage, which not only induced better compliance from the workers<sup>102</sup> but also made the work of union organisers more difficult.

The factory tended to utilise the informal network in the recruitment of women workers, rather than other methods. There were several advantages for the firm in this. The workers who recommended their families or friends felt some responsibility for the performance of the recruits they sponsored, and paid some attention to their work in the factory. Jennifer, as well as Kelly, who took their sons to work as casual workers, advised and checked their sons to make sure that they reached a satisfactory standard in performing the job. They were concerned if their sons make mistakes. Besides, by utilising this network, there is a feeling of indebtedness, which in turn, increases their loyalty. Moreover, this method facilitates an environment of the 'family imaginary' created by the company<sup>103</sup>.

Furthermore, because of their reliance on informal networks the firm was not taking an unwarranted risk on the quality of their workers. They were still protected by the fact that every newcomer is interviewed and is employed on a probationary period for a certain time<sup>104</sup>. Most workers stated that only a very few workers were not satisfactory during the probationary period. Perhaps this is related to the nature of jobs which were relatively unskilled and could be done easily by new workers. Therefore the qualifications for entry were not high. If the factory needed experienced workers, then job centres would be a better alternative, since

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<sup>102</sup> See also 'Control Mechanism' section and 'The Union' in chapter IV.

<sup>103</sup> See the discussion of the rhetoric of 'family' relationships in the section on 'Control Mechanisms'.

<sup>104</sup> According to the workers' experiences in these two sections, after working for two weeks, they would be told by the forewoman if they were accepted or not.

the selection would be more rigid than the informal network. The job centre officer would select applicants who are appropriate to the factory requirements, by making them fill out an application form and interviewing them. Indeed, the job centre would only recommend applicants who fulfilled the factory's requirements, as otherwise there would be complaints from the company<sup>105</sup>.

In conclusion, one can say that informal networks are important channels for workers' recruitment and also contribute significantly to the development of the workers' loyalty to the company.

#### (ii) Career Structures or The Absence of Career Structures?

The absence of career structures is a frequently observed characteristic of women's experience in the labour market. Davis (1991:1) who draws on the Australian experience, notes that

*...there is overwhelming and undisputed evidence that women for the most part are segregated into a small number of industries and occupations and that their employment is characterised by low pay, poor conditions and lack of career opportunities<sup>106</sup>.*

A similar position can be found widely in the developing countries. Humphrey (1985) notes that multinational companies hire women for the lowest paid, dead-end jobs at the bottom of the job hierarchy. By contrast men are placed in relatively higher paid jobs. In the Free Trade Zone areas, approximately 80 per cent of the workers are women who mainly perform in less secure assembly-line jobs, while the better positions, such as the administrative, professional and technical are occupied by men (Mitter, 1986).

In this section, I shall discuss the career structures or the absence of career structures and will cover the workers' viewpoint about these structures. Most female workers were process workers performing jobs which are classified as unskilled. This led to their being placed at the

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<sup>105</sup> For instance, I was told by a male officer from Springvale job centre that the companies often complain to the job centre that the job centres do not send them appropriate candidates. Based on my own experience in trying to gain a factory job for fieldwork, I applied for a factory job which offered two weeks training and six months continuous work. I was interviewed, but he (the male officer from Springvale job centre) rejected my application on the grounds of my being an overseas student. According to him the factory was reluctant to employ overseas students because of immigration complications. He said that he did not believe that I was able to stay in the factory for a six months period which meant that I would be a liability to the factory particularly because the factory provides two weeks training.

<sup>106</sup> Davis cites from 'Women at Work: Facts and Figures', *Women at Work*, Department of Employment, Education and Training, Canberra.

bottom of the hierarchy. In this respect, there is a clear similarity between the 'Bravo' factory and those found in developing countries. The significant point we need to identify then is that why is it so? Most studies concentrate on the question of why women are kept down at bottom of the hierarchy. Mitter (1986) argues that this inferior position of women in the labour market is partly caused by the gender ideology which assumes women are not the breadwinners, while Lin (1982) believes that their femininity becomes a central source of supervisory control and socio-cultural manipulation. It also provided powerful means of ensuring their continued docility, and served as a rationale for denying them opportunities of acquiring skills and prospects of job advancement. I agree with the above points where gender ideology and women's femininity have been manipulated to keep down women's position in the labour market. But there are important points that need to be taken into account. One of these is the low percentage of women with higher qualifications; this too results in subordination of women. These notions are not seen from the workers' viewpoint: the most important point then is to understand 'how do the female workers perceive such a situation ?'

Though the majority of women in the Auto-Assembly and the Paint-Shop have been working in this factory for more than ten years<sup>107</sup>, their status has remained as process workers. Among the women workers, only five of them have experienced promotions, one becoming a forewoman and four becoming leading-hands. Accordingly, the selection of such positions was based mainly upon particular points, such as their work attendance record, their level of skill, and ability in English<sup>108</sup>.

The workers' viewpoint about promotion varied. The important attitude of many of them was that they were not interested in such positions. They were not jealous of those who were promoted. Wiji was fluent in English, and she was offered a position of leading-hand, but she did not accept this position due to the heavy responsibility and low wages. She said:

*I was offered a position as a leading hand in the [Marcelle's] room. I rejected this offer because I knew that it was going to be difficult for me having various tasks and responsibilities. Besides, the pay rose approximately \$ 20.00 or 25.00 per week. There was no point in accepting it.*

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<sup>107</sup> See also 'General Picture of Migrant Women' section in chapter III.

<sup>108</sup> See also the 'Management'.

Actually, Wiji was quite sure that she had the capability to do so, but she chose not to accept it because there was no balance between the responsibility and the compensation. Wiji was not jealous of those who became leading-hands<sup>109</sup>.

Another important feature was the feeling of inferiority. This reason had been stated by elderly workers. In this case, lack of English skill was the main reason why they were negative about their realistic prospects of gaining promotions. Though they perceived that they were able to do the job satisfactorily, they kept thinking that they would be unable to handle such positions because they might misunderstand their bosses' instructions. For instance, Danni among others said that they would never dream of becoming leading-hands or forewomen. This was because they thought that their understanding was limited. Some of them were illiterate. In order to be a leading-hand or forewoman, one must have a little knowledge and understanding of reading and writing English. Sometimes, a leading-hand is expected to count and write the number of products, as well as other similar duties which assumed a minimal level of literacy.

Their reluctance to shoulder the responsibilities and their awareness of their lack of English affected workers' attitudes towards promotion.

Another important point was that they freely admitted that the most important thing for them was money, not promotion or career. Katherine, for instance, said

*I don't care about who will become the leading-hand, and I don't care about my [position], but I do care about money. I want to bring money home, that's all.*

Unlike the above cases, a few workers believed that the promotion system was unfair. They thought that only Italian workers were considered for promotion. This view was held mostly by those who felt that their English skills were better than the others.

In general, even though there was an absence of career prospects, most of the workers accepted this fate without complaint. It seemed that this feeling of inferiority was the most important reason. We can link these cases to more general social and cultural influences which situate migrant women collectively as a typical vulnerable subgroup ideally suited for recruitment as docile workers in low-skilled labour - intensive industries. Besides, the workers' interests in money is far greater than a need for position which is indicative of status only.

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<sup>109</sup> In this case, I restricted my observations to attitudes of jealousy in gaining the promotion. I did not talk about the workers attitude towards those who held positions. Wiji, for instance, often complained about the 'unfair' attitude of Suzanne (one of the Italian leading-hands).

However, there are signs that the factory is re-assessing its productive and industrial relations strategies because of ineluctable pressures to compete in the world economy. It is moving away from Fordist production and investigating a wide-ranging re-organisation involving investment in more advanced technology to be utilised by a multi-skilled labour force. If these plans are carried through then the factory's dependence on low-skilled migrant workers will contract severely. A transformation of this kind would have grave consequences for the current workforce who lack confidence and basic skills, and who are presented with no encouragement or opportunity to improve their position in the labour market or even within the very limited career structure that currently exists.

## E. FACTORY SUB-CULTURE

### (i) '*Galoma*'<sup>110</sup>: Escape from Hardship

This section will attempt to answer two questions. How do workers deal with working life in a factory where the jobs are repetitive and hard, and how they convert poor working conditions into a more tolerable place to work?

Generally, workers were aware that their working conditions were not satisfying and that their jobs were boring. Year after year, they did repetitive tasks inside a huge factory space with inadequate heater and fan facilities. Several workers developed Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI), and complaints of tiredness were common. These were completely justified. I had similar experiences whilst working there for approximately six months in order to get the data for this thesis. From the first day I commenced work, on completion of the day and walking home, I found my shoulder to be painful. It is not hard to imagine how debilitating it is for workers who must work in the factory, year after year, ignoring their tiredness for the sake of both their own and their families' survival.

The workers not only realised that their jobs were hard, but they also realised they spent a lot of time at the factory. Many said that their time at home was only adequate to clean, cook, eat dinner and sleep, there was no time for enjoyment. Partly because of this awareness they attempted to make the work environment an enjoyable place. There are many examples of how they did this, from the telling of sexual jokes, to the stealing of time for drinking, eating, and so forth. Whilst, to a certain extent, there are similarities between the Auto-Assembly and the Paint-Shop there are also differences.

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<sup>110</sup> '*Galoma*' is an Italian word meaning a horse. This word was used by Italian workers to replace the word for sexual intercourse. Substituting it for the actual word gave the freedom to use it.

The Auto-Assembly section was part of a huge room which had been divided into several departments, such as Quality Control and Storage. The Auto-Assembly section was not big. The total number of workers was fifteen women and one man<sup>111</sup>. The manager's office was located out of the area; it was situated in the corner of the Paint-Shop. In the Auto-Assembly section the workers came from several different ethnic backgrounds, had formed close relationships with one another, often teasing each other while they worked. This was due to Sophia, the leading-hand in this section, having a good understanding of the workers. The important criteria for her was that the workers kept up productivity.

Roy (1974:45) suggests that sex is by no means a taboo topic in the blue-collar world of work. Mona, an Italian, really loved to tell jokes which ranged from sexual to racial topics. Mona liked to tease everybody, not distinguishing between female and male workers. For instance, Stella, a Russian lady who was fifty four years old, effectively became Mona's 'straight-man' and was the primary target for Mona's sexual and racial jokes. Other workers would add to Mona's jokes to make the atmosphere funnier. While Mona worked, she would shout and move her shoulder to see Stella, who would often be working two lines behind her or further down her line.

"[Stella], Did your husband give you 'banana'<sup>112</sup> last night." Stella who was never angry when teased, used to respond,

"Of course."

Mona shouting again,

"Did you close your eyes because Russians don't know how wonderful 'banana' is."

Everybody, then, used to laugh. Gina, the Mauritian, often responded to this joke.

"Russian girls do not feel anything, only open their legs if husbands give for 'banana'".

This kind of joke was repeated often throughout the day. Stella was always the target for everybody when they made a sexual joke. Some workers often asked each other for a specific word particularly related to sexual matters, so they could make jokes by using different languages. For instance, one day, Gina called me and told me to ask Stella the meaning of '*Kulva*' and '*Ibass*'. I did exactly what Gina told me to do. Stella was staring at me, but she refrained from laughing, and said,

"Who told you?"

Gina and Mona were laughing, and saying simultaneously,

"*Kulva* is naughty, '*Ibass*' is do sex."

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<sup>111</sup> Cheong, the man, was later moved to the Paint-Shop.

<sup>112</sup> Instead of using the word penis, workers substituted with 'banana'.

Most of the workers saw sexual jokes as an effective formula for escaping from the physical reality of their lives, which consisted of hour after hour of hard, repetitive and boring tasks. The older women were more active than the younger women in telling sexual jokes. The younger women tended to listen and enjoy the joke, but were often too shy to tell them. Meilan, a Laotian, the youngest in this section, would only smile if someone teased her by raising a sexual subject, she never replied to it.

Sexual harassment of men also occurred when men passed through the Auto-Assembly section. Mona would not hesitate to expose her breasts by opening her blouse and bra and smiling at them whilst they passed by. The rest of the workers were amused by this type of joke. It indicated a variation in the more usual type of sexual harassment that occurred. It was not only women who could be harassed, men also could be harassed.

Sexual jokes also happened in the Paint-Shop. The difference with the Auto-Assembly area was that, in there everybody was involved, while in the Paint-Shop, sexual jokes were told only by the Italians who were the dominant ethnic group in the section. There were several types of sexual joke in this section. '*Galoma*' was the most important word in their vocabulary. Suzanne, one of the leading-hands, really liked to talk about it. After telling me what '*galoma*' meant she would thereafter recount her nights sexual experiences. She would laughingly say whilst at the same time imitating the sound of her passion:

"I have '*galoma*' last night. I was on top last night."

Gabriella, the forewoman, Theresa and Danni used to laughingly tease me.

"You find boy friend here, your husband? Just forget it<sup>113</sup> and then you try in the top."

Suzanne even said,

"Look, here<sup>114</sup>, I have felt wet, if I talk about '*galoma*', I want to do it."

This joke ended when Suzanne could not stand any more because of her desire to go to the ladies' room. Workers who were in the vicinity heard the conversation. Some laughed or smiled, others seemed embarrassed which was apparent by their blushing and changing expression. This sort of joke was standard and repetitive. It was believed by the Italian workers

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<sup>113</sup> When interviewed, the workers would often ask me if I was married or not and where my husband was. I always told them frankly about my circumstances, so that I could expect that they would talk to me openly too.

<sup>114</sup> She pointed to her genitals.



that by joking work hours passed more quickly and actual work time was shorter.

Another sexual joke enjoyed by some of the Italian workers was similar to those in the Auto-Assembly, where 'banana' became the model for the joke. Katherine, an Italian, always liked to make jokes around the 'banana' idea. From the time I commenced work in the factory, I noted that she spent most of her time on the line checking articles painted by male spray-painters. Every time Franco, an old Greek spray-painter in her section, made a mistake in his painting, she would accuse him of thinking only of his 'banana'. When I interviewed him, she kept interrupting us several times by asking,

"Do [Franco] talk about 'banana' to you?."

She repeated this question, anytime I talked with him. She would also discuss the 'banana' joke with Sylvia, a Yugoslav who also enjoyed this kind of a joke<sup>115</sup>. The rest of the workers, with the exception of the Greek women workers who do not like to discuss sexual matters in front of people, would listen to the jokes but never tell them. The Greek women had different cultural norms. Effie, one of the three Greek women said:

*Italians always enjoy to say dirty word, I don't like it. It is taboo for us to say that kind of word. I will feel regret if I say that, especially in front of man, or even in front of girls.*

These Greek views on sexual matters were well-known to the some of Italians who were amused by them. They often joked about Greek cultural attitudes, particularly in relation to sexual matters. Theresa and Danni laughingly said:

"Greek won't eat meat for several days before Easter, and they won't have sex."

Obviously they thought this type of prohibition was ridiculous. They also laughed at me when they discovered that I fasted during '*Ramadan*'<sup>116</sup>. Theresa and Danni made a habit of asking me a lot of questions which became standard in their routine. They would ask me, "can you have meat?, can you have vegetable?, can you have water?, can you smoke only one cigarette?, can you have sex?". When I replied, 'no' to all these questions they would shout and laugh pointing up the last question,

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<sup>115</sup> Sylvia is the only one of the non-Italian workers who told sexual jokes.

<sup>116</sup> '*Ramadan*' is a month during which Moslems fast. '*Ramadan*' fell in the middle of my research which meant that as a Moslem I had to fast for one month. During this time, I did not eat lunch with the workers, but continued to stay with them during the lunch break.

because of its sexual content. They thought my fasting meant that I liked to suffer. They laughingly said, "no food is silly, no sex is awful, ". Customs different from theirs became a primary source of jokes for them.

Ethnic difference was not only important in the telling of sexual jokes but was also the source of other types of jokes. In the Auto-Assembly when I first commenced my research, before the March 1991 dismissals, Fi, a Cook Islander, was often teased by her co-workers. They called her 'coconut girl'<sup>117</sup>. Gina used to tease her every time they worked together at one table, shouting, "coconut girl is bad girl". A week after my arrival in the factory Gina said to me:

"Don't talk to her, she is bad girl, look at her head, it just like coconut, hard."

Fi would always respond immediately to this joke by saying,

"I am very good girl."

Gina and Fi would not only tease each other verbally but would also indulge in some horse-play, pushing each other in the course of their work. They worked at two adjoining tables. The boxes where the articles were packed were located behind them. Gina who worked on the right hand-side picked the articles to be cleaned and have a nail put into them from the box. Fi's task was to hammer in the nail and to pack them in the other box. Fi often pushed Gina as she was taking the articles from the box. Gina would wait for a similar chance to push Fi when it was her turn to put the articles into the box. They would laugh together. This kind of horse-play was repeated on many occasions. Sophia saw this happening but she ignored it because she understood the workers' boredom because of having to perform such monotonous jobs. Unlike Sophia, David would be angry if he saw this horse-play occurring because he believed it reduced workers' productivity. Both workers knew David's attitude so they always looked around to check whether he was watching when they had these informal breaks. In comparison to the workers in the Paint-shop, the workers in the Auto-Assembly were luckier because their location was bordered by a wall to David's office, which prevented David watching them all the time.

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<sup>117</sup> Fi was called 'coconut girl' because the tiny island from where she comes had plenty of coconut trees. Fi was extremely proud of her home which she described as an island paradise. According to her, the weather was perfect, the life was not rushed, the beaches were just beautiful. Her co-workers often made fun of her sense of pride where the island was concerned.

The different locations of the two sections also became an important source for making jokes. If one was shifted to the Paint-Shop for a certain time, they would become the butt of a particular joke. The co-workers would laugh at them, and say,

"Go to the hell," when the worker returned to the Auto-Assembly for a short visit during their lunch break to chat<sup>118</sup>.

Unlike the Auto-assembly where the workers stuck together and there was good interaction, in the Paint-Shop workers were divided into several small groups that were changeable<sup>119</sup>. When I started my fieldwork, Eva, Jennifer and Patricia worked close to each other for approximately one month. After that, Eva was moved to the line where her task was to check and pack the articles that had been painted. Jennifer was rotated to a different job, working with Ivone, a Russian lady, for several days. One found that workers did not stay in one place, mostly they kept moving. These circumstances resulted in the constant division of small groups, which prevented the workers from making strong ties with each other. There were exceptions, particularly where workers happened to work together for long periods of time. They formed strong bonds with one another and these were maintained by having lunch together<sup>120</sup>.

Moreover, the Paint-Shop room was so large that it was not possible for the workers to work closely together. As discussed previously, this group of workers were neither permanent nor strong. However, the above reasons are not sufficient to explain the divisions between the workers in the Paint-Shop. The basis for ties among the group is not always related to where the workers is located. Martha (an Italian) and Dorothy (Australian born) often worked together to check and pack products after they were painted. They worked on an automatic machine and hardly communicated with each other during work-hours. This was partly due to a language barrier as Martha spoke only broken English, and Dorothy spoke fluent English. Martha complained that she could not understand Dorothy's accent. Dorothy, in explaining why she was reluctant to talk, said "[Martha] speaks in broken English, I cannot understand her, and I have to speak the way she speaks, for her to understand me". Because they worked on an automatic machine, if one needed to go to the 'rest' room, someone else had to be found to replace her. Martha was very happy if an Italian lady replaced Dorothy's position: she would talk and giggle throughout

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<sup>118</sup> The paint-Shop and the Auto-Assembly had different times for commencing work, for breaks and for finishing work.

<sup>119</sup> The workers did not always stay in one place. They were rotated from one job to another, although because of considerations of age, ability, and so forth, some of the workers were rarely rotated.

<sup>120</sup> This was a permanent group of workers who rarely moved out of the Paint-Shop.

Dorothy's absence. Here, it was clear that the ethnic tie was significant in the pattern of the work relationship.

On occasions when workers had time to talk, several topics were discussed and unlike Cho's (1985:201) study which found that the most popular topic among the married women was "cooking, husbands, and children", the range of subjects discussed was not limited to family life. The recession was the most important topic.

## F. OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY AND JOB SECURITY

The majority of the workers planned to stay in their current jobs. The fear of a new environment became a constraint for migrant women to move from one job to another. However, this was not the only reason why migrant women continue to work in the factory; job security was also another important reason for that.

### (i) Occupational Mobility

Some workers had worked elsewhere prior to their employment in the 'Bravo' factory. Their earlier employment varied from factory to restaurant work. The reason for quitting those jobs were various. Lydia and Toula had worked in a factory, but resigned from these jobs because of pregnancies. Finau worked in the restaurant but quit because the job in the 'Bravo' factory offered higher wages.

However, for most of the women, working in this factory was their first job in Australia and the majority had worked for the company for more than ten years. Why was this so, given that the workers often described the work as boring and repetitive? Some of the Italian and Yugoslav workers liked the way the boss treated them. Personal relationships among the workers and with their superiors is a major factor in workers continuing to work at the factory. The creation of a sense of loyalty to the company was also important. Although the workers understood their position in the company, they believed that they could not demand more money without taking into consideration the company's economic situation: without increasing productivity they fear that the company might go into liquidation. The situation was of great concern to the workers who were desperately afraid of losing their jobs. Knowing of their fears, management frequently used the excuse of the recession to stem wage demands.

For some, long-term employment did not engender loyalty; they did not particularly enjoy their work but remained because they were aware that their lack of fluency in English prevented them from finding better jobs. For others, lacking time to look for another job was a significant factor. Kate, a thirty year old Maltese, had been working at the factory for sixteen years. She had thought several time about leaving the factory:

*When I feel bad, I want to move out, but I actually never apply for another job. Because I don't have time to look for another job as you know, every day I am here, working, no work, no money.*

This characteristic of no time to look for other work was an extremely important factor in workers remaining with the factory. If a worker is absent from work, they not only lose money but fear management will consider them unreliable. The workers also believe that any other job would be the same with regard to wages and conditions. Skevvie said:

*If me move out, me will only find the same job, everywhere is the same. Me have no English, very poor, so me will find only factory job again, no more. better to stay here, me don't want to move.*

Another worker expressing sentiments echoed by others said: "it is better to stay in one job, and good for everyone else too. We know the job, new job make me worry to make mistake". Most workers felt that if they stayed a long time in one factory they would be more secure and would not be sacked easily. Moreover most thought they were lucky to have their job and desired to keep it.

#### (ii) Job Security

The workers attitude to their job security was influenced by the financial condition of the factory (when I did the research, the company was one of many companies affected badly by the recession), and the unemployment situation in the community generally (Victoria had more than ten per cent unemployment in mid 1991).

The recession in the factory resulted in the dismissal of some workers, both male and female. Some workers had been retrenched from the Post-Moulding section, in December 1990. The retrenchments were totally unexpected and depressed and saddened the workers<sup>121</sup>. There was a further dismissal of workers from the Post-Moulding section in March 1991. The reasons given for the dismissal of these twelve workers were the same as for the December dismissal: the recession; the factory's downturn was due to its dependence on the car manufacturing companies, which often face market fluctuations, but which were then suffering both from the recession and from the loss of tariff protection. Nissan had closed their factory down for one month. These incidents resulted in a general feeling of insecurity among the workers.

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<sup>121</sup> See the discussion of workers' sadness due to the dismissals in 'The Union' Chapter IV.

However some workers appeared philosophical about the situation. Effie, a Greek, suggested it was just for show. She said: "everything is always change, only the change itself is not change". On the morning before a meeting with union representatives regarding workers' dismissal, workers were their normal selves, with everybody happy and laughing as they talked and teased each other. At the meeting with the union representatives it was explained to them that on the following Friday some workers would be retrenched due to the economic situation. After the meeting, every one appeared worried. On the first workday after the union meeting workers were sad, there were no smiles or banter and the work areas were quiet. That morning when the 'big boss' (the top manager) was seen entering David's office the workers guessed he was delivering the list of workers to be retrenched. They watched their forewoman and the leading-hands to see if they would be called. Gabriella and Sophia were called by David. Gabriella then called seven women and Sophia called five to accompany them to see David. These workers saw David and received a letter that stated that due to the economic recession, they were to finish work on the following Friday and that they would receive a redundancy package, the amount of which had been agreed between the factory management and the union. The workers would also get one day off to look for another job. After receiving this news the workers came back to the shopfloor, looking very sad, almost in tears. They did not desire to work any more and although they tried to look happy, it was apparent they were really depressed. Fi said: "it is OK I have got what I want, I can go to Sydney". But, then, because she could not avoid the sadness, she said: "this is my first job in Australia, and perhaps the last job for me here, because I know it is not easy to get job". Sophia tried to cheer them up and asked them how they would tell their families about this bad news. Finau, a Fijian lady expressed her feeling: "I cannot do anything, I have to accept this fate. I cannot blame whosoever, I am just the victim of the economic recession here". She hoped that what David had told them was true. When the factory recommenced hiring casual labour a month after the retrenchments only four of these workers were reinstated. Sons of other employees, who had not previously worked at the factory, were employed at this time also.

After the March retrenchments the atmosphere on the factory floor changed dramatically. Workers were silent, they no longer laughed, joked or teased each other. Their topics of conversations were limited to work-related issues and the role of the union, and were coloured by references to worry regarding their job security, and a future of economic uncertainty. Each day when they talked among themselves about the situation they would say to each other 'goodbye'. This expression mirrored their anxiety and their uncertainty about their future. Every time David passed their work areas, or called the forewoman or leading-hands, the workers

immediately became anxious, fearing there would be more dismissals. Some weeks later, more dismissals occurred whilst I was still there, although not from among the process workers in the sections where I was employed. The trauma of the retrenchments was still very evident when I left after completing my field work.

The factory workers correctly perceived that their job security problems were outside their control and that their sole option was to forget their dissatisfactions with their work and work conditions and to continue to work hard for a better future.

Approximately seven months after leaving the factory, I met some of the workers again. They reported that their situation and job satisfaction was worse than when I was there. This was brought about by the news of the closing of the Nissan plant. *The Australian* newspaper reported in February 1992 that Nissan would retrench huge numbers of workers by October 1992. This news had resulted in the 'Bravo' factory workers deciding that their jobs would almost certainly disappear. The workers were most unhappy about Nissan's plans because of the future effect it would have on their jobs and the effect it was currently having on the level of satisfaction with their work.

## G. CONCLUSION

A combination of several modes of control has effectively resulted in migrant workers' obedience and subordination. Each mode of control has its own source of strength, and in combination they reinforce each other with great potency. For instance, the technical control of workers may not be so effective a tool of control, but when it is supported by other techniques, it is nearly relentless. Workers have developed their own strategies to try to counter the multi-level imperatives which the factory mobilises to direct their labour. These strategies often did not work smoothly without gaining the cooperation of other workers.

A harmonious relationship, often based on the ethnic bond, not only affected the low occupational mobility among the workers, it also reduced their powers of resistance. The general absence of career structures has been accepted by the majority of the workers without complaint. This silence was partly affected by two main points: the reluctance to shoulder the responsibilities and the feeling of inferiority because of lack of fluency in English.





## CHAPTER VI THE MANAGEMENT

### A. INTRODUCTION

In order to understand the strategies of the firm and their impact on workers, it is necessary to look at the situation from the viewpoint of management. From the management perspective, its tasks are to decide what products are to be produced, to control the appropriate technical equipment and procedures, and to create a productive, efficient and harmonious workforce (Saunders, 1973:viii). Braverman (1974:68) points out that the essential idea of all management systems is one of control. The degree to which the executives control the multifarious tasks of their business is fundamental to the factory's survival. This assumption is challenged by those who argue for a flexible specialisation approach.

In this debate Wood (1989:11) recognises that:

*For some, Braverman is broadly right in that management's prime aim is control and it will only resort to tactics which enhance workers' autonomy - what Friedman (1977) calls responsible autonomy strategies - when workers' resistance and power is high, as when labour is relatively scarce.*

However, he argues that new types of managerial initiatives have developed to intensify control. Labour is no longer seen as expandable (see Piore and Sabel, 1984). There is a new awareness of a "qualitative significance of human work performance", argue Kern and Schumann (1987:160)<sup>122</sup>.

In the 'Bravo' factory, central control remains integral to management strategies. The decision to shift to 'post Fordist' methods is met with uncertainty by middle management. The main technological innovation to date is the adoption of computer controls for injection-moulding. There is training to improve workers' skills<sup>123</sup> but it is only available in a few departments.

The strategies used by management raise a large number of issues. In this section I will restrict the discussion to those aspects which significantly impact on workers. These are: the organisational structure of factory personnel, the 'human' factor (motivation, morale, loyalty etc), and the nature of relationships between supplier factories such as 'Bravo' and the automobile manufacturing companies. The discussion of the internal

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<sup>122</sup> Cited by Wood, 1989:12.

<sup>123</sup> Increasing workers' skills is usually essential to the adoption of flexible specialisation and post-Fordism.

structure of the factory will enable us to understand how management has put together an efficient organisation. The organisation of a labour process cannot be understood without reference to management's need to control both it and the workers involved in it. The management mapped the factory into several areas, each producing specific items in such a way that it was logically linked to the activity of neighbouring areas.

'Bravo' management claimed that the 'human' factor was the most difficult task to deal with. To reduce this difficulty, they had developed an approach which they believed treated workers with dignity. They had created an effective communication system which had established, they believed, a sense of understanding and loyalty. In an endeavour to promote a peaceful and accepting atmosphere, management constantly informed the employees of the factory's dependence on the automobile manufacturing companies who were their customers. This strategy succeeded in making sure workers did not become complacent by making them realise that the continued success of their workplace was dependent on the marketing accomplishments of the various automobile manufacturing companies supplied by the 'Bravo' factory.

## B. 'BRAVO' AND ITS STRUCTURE

'Bravo' was part of a multinational corporation. In this section I shall discuss the connections between 'Bravo' and its corporate headquarters and with other companies owned by the same corporation. 'Bravo', which had the autonomy to hire workers according to their own selection preferences, segregated their workforce on a sexual basis. 'Bravo' management's viewpoint on the structure of its workforce will be the second point to be discussed in this section.

### (i) The Nature of Relationship to 'Carva'<sup>124</sup>

There are two distinct types of factories within this corporation: the first were loosely integrated to the parent company, the second were closely integrated. Management of loosely integrated firms, those with a high degree of autonomy from the parent company, had the freedom to make decisions about the day-to-day running of the factory, and about other critical areas such as production, hiring and firing of workers, budget etc. The managements of the other class of subsidiary, those without autonomy, had to receive orders from head office regarding the day-to-day running of the factory.

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<sup>124</sup> 'Carva' is the pseudonym for the other companies under the same corporation.

'Bravo' belonged to the first category of relatively autonomous firms. In order to understand the administrative structure of 'Bravo' one has to understand its relationship to 'Carva'. 'Bravo' was one branch of a multinational corporation whose headquarters were located in Great Britain. 'Carva' is spread throughout Great Britain, the United States, and the major cities in Australia and Asia (see Glenda Korporaal, 1991:38) such as Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia<sup>125</sup>. 'Carva' produces numbers of different commodities ranging from plastics, packaging, building materials, glass, and textiles. Each branch is operated as a separate entity and profit centre. The growth of each operation is seen as essential for this corporation. An address by the managing director of the Melbourne division claimed there would be an expansion in the European packaging industry in the future (reports in the Australian financial press, 1992<sup>126</sup>). Vietnam is also to be targeted for the new operation (reports in the Australian financial press, 1992<sup>127</sup>). In Melbourne alone there are a number of factories belonging to 'Carva' which produce different commodities such as vinyl products, sheet extrusion and moulding. The 'Bravo' factory where this research was conducted produced plastic mouldings. The task of the factory as stated by the general manager is:

*to take granules of plastic which are macro-molecules of simple organic substances, heat them until they melt and then press them into shapes. Most of the shapes have an end use in the automobile. In 50% of the cases the shapes made are packed and shipped direct to the end user. In the other 50% of the cases the parts are directed for further processing which may include painting and/or assembly.*

There are many automobiles which are partially fitted out by this factory: they include models made by Ford, Nissan, Toyota, and Mitsubishi.

The relationship between the 'Bravo' factory and 'Carva' was described by the general manager as follows:

*['Bravo'] was a publicly listed Australian company managed by a board of directors. Its relationship to ['Carva'] worldwide could be described as one of distant cousins. Each factory has virtual total autonomy in all areas of day to day running with the exception of being able to make decisions on capital expenditure. Planning is done on a factory to factory basis. Each factory is a separate entity,*

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<sup>125</sup> This was also based on the factory annual report of 1990.

<sup>126</sup> I have the specific articles but direct citation would undermine confidentiality.

<sup>127</sup> I have the specific articles, but direct citation would undermine confidentiality.

*and was on an equal footing with every other factory. This was so because it was the ['Carva'] factory philosophy to make each entity responsible for its own outcome with no umbrella support from a head office structure.*

The term 'distant cousins' is something of a misnomer. It was used by the general manager to describe the relationship between 'Bravo' and 'Carva'. Although each factory within Bravo manages itself quite distinctly from any other and from the headquarters of 'Carva', it should be noted that the design and type of commodities being produced in each factory were totally compatible with each other so that their operations and output were capable of co-ordination, exchange of products, and re-deployment at a higher, strategic level.

How the 'Bravo' factory fitted into this scheme illustrates the actual degree of autonomy it had. Due to my limited information, I can only discuss two aspects of managerial domain, the hiring and firing of workers (except for the top executives, who were recruited in a different way and controlled from outside the factory), and the type of products produced.

#### (a) The Process of Hiring and Firing of Workers

In the 'Bravo' factory, the way in which workers were recruited and selected was completely at the discretion of its own management. However to some degree, there were boundaries to this autonomy.

The recruitment of workers was done in several ways. The factory often places advertisements regarding job vacancies in the Commonwealth government job centres. They sometimes interviewed any suitable job seekers who came directly to the factory seeking work. All of these were interviewed regardless of whether there was a demand or not. Perhaps the most important recruiting channel was through their own employee networks<sup>128</sup>.

The dismissal of workers was also decided by the 'Bravo' factory management. Management always claimed that retrenchments only took place when, for economic reasons, the management had no alternative. This factory's economic uncertainty, which it was claimed was the reason for dismissing some workers, was not entirely due to declining orders as will be shown below. However, during the period of my fieldwork, it was true that the factory was facing some decline in orders due to decreasing auto sales.

Glenda Korporaal (1991) points out that "Manufacturers of cars, steel, clothing, textiles and footwear - traditionally the most protected industries - are facing the severest shake-up" (1991:38). However,

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<sup>128</sup> This has been discussed in the 'Recruitment' section in chapter V.

manufacturers may not have suffered as much negative impact as they claimed because of their ability to carry out production offshore. Korporaal reports that:

*The whittling down of tariff charges, the deregulation of the Australian financial industry since 1983 and the growing attraction of Asia as a production centre and as a market have prompted a major restructuring of Australian industry in the past few years. Manufacturers are increasing their investment in Asian countries and stepping up sourcing from Asian producers (1991:38).*

The reality is that 'Bravo', as part of 'Carva', is one of those organisations which is spreading its investments into Asia. Korporaal (1991:38) notes that 'Carva' has seen the benefits of offshore production<sup>129</sup>. Therefore the degree to which the recession has hit this factory is difficult to determine with any precision. Reports in the Australian financial press<sup>130</sup> (1992) reported that the 'Carva' corporation lost 4000 jobs worldwide. Based on figures released early in 1992, companies involved in auto parts production had experienced a decline in sales. The recession may have disturbed some of the companies within the corporation but it did not trouble all of them. The 1990 Annual Report of the corporation showed that divesting to South East Asian countries could help the corporation by offsetting the effects of the economic slowdown in Australia. Industrial restructuring in Australia would not really have resulted in insolvency for the manufacturers because there were alternatives for investment and sales. I would argue that the claim by the employers that they had no alternative but to retrench was disingenuous. Theoretically new contracts could have been found and new production lines commenced. The corporation did precisely this by seeking more profitable markets in countries offshore to expand to. It seems workers will always be sacrificed for the sake of employers' interests.

The factory fired workers on numerous occasions during my field work<sup>131</sup>. The dismissal of workers seemed to be gender-specific. In spite of an agreement negotiated between the management and the union that length of service would be a major consideration in choosing which

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<sup>129</sup> Based on the factory annual report of 1990, South East Asian markets helped balance the economic slowdown in Australia. For instance, an offshore operation for the Polymer group **only**, China General Plastics, recorded healthy results reflecting the relative strength of South Eastern markets and the on-going benefits of intensive capital investment (Annual Report 1990:7). This indicates there are some advantages for companies carrying out offshore production in Asian countries.

<sup>130</sup> I have the specific articles, but direct citation would undermine confidentiality.

<sup>131</sup> Details of this has been discussed in chapter IV.

workers to fire, women in the Paint-Shop who had worked in the factory longer than some of the men were retrenched, while the men were kept on.

Management always blamed economic problems as justification for retrenchments. Workers were often informed by management that declining car sales were resulting in a reduction of orders to the factory. This reason was given to the workers to create an atmosphere of understanding of the company's position and to alleviate insecurity. The workers tried to adjust to the retrenchment of their colleagues positively, but there is no doubt that the sackings created acute feelings of insecurity among the rest of the workers<sup>132</sup>.

It can be seen that the firing of workers from the factory was fully under the control of the factory management, but it can also be seen that strategic decisions by the corporation headquarters (offshore investment) had a devastating impact on the factory, its management and workers. The autonomy of this factory was clearly limited.

In the Paint-Shop and Auto-Assembly where this research was conducted, the hiring and firing of workers was formally under the control of management but the way in which these two processes were carried out differed slightly. With respect to hiring of workers (both permanent and casual), these were often recruited through the current employee network. Workers were in the habit of asking their immediate superior (such as the forelady) if there was a vacancy for a family member or friend. The forelady in turn would discuss this request with the manager and if there were job vacancies, the applicant would then proceed through to the administrative officer who was the formal hirer of personnel<sup>133</sup>.

Unlike the recruitment of new workers, the procedure for firing workers was handled totally by the top management usually without middle management (forelady) participation. If the management required information about a particular worker's diligence and quality of work to aid their decision, then the forelady was consulted. Management was frequently constrained by the union in deciding to dismiss a worker. Nevertheless, the power of management was much greater than that of the union. Where dismissals were due to the economic recession the union usually could not negotiate a good severance deal for those retrenched.

To understand the degree of autonomy enjoyed by 'Bravo' factory management it is inadequate to discuss only this in relation to the autonomy of hiring and retrenching staff; one needs to survey a range of

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<sup>132</sup> See also 'Pattern of Relationships Among Workers' section in chapter V.

<sup>133</sup> Detailed discussion of this issue appears in the section on 'Recruitment' in chapter V.

other factors as well. However, due to the difficulty I had in obtaining information regarding how management worked, I am able to discuss only one other aspect, namely the autonomy management had in selecting a particular product to manufacture.

(b) Selection of Product

The general manager, when interviewed, made it quite clear that selection of what product to manufacture was related to two quite distinct factors:

*Quite clearly the type of product which the company makes should have an historical fit with what is already being produced. Secondly, regard is always taken of what other [Carva] companies are producing.*

Although the 'Bravo' factory management had altered several times<sup>134</sup> there had not been any alterations to the type of products produced, although from time to time new lines were manufactured. Obviously each new management took into account factors such as demand and marketing of the products being produced. Recently the factory was not producing new lines and was actively engaged in reducing the variety of articles being manufactured. For instance it no longer produced toys, or household plastic equipment, both lines it had produced for some years. These were now being produced by an offshore company belonging to the 'Carva' group. I suggest that it should not be concluded that retrenchments were taking place simply because of a downturn in the Australian economy. They were also occurring because of corporation policy to relocate plants overseas and to restructure its operations.

It can therefore be seen that there are boundaries to the factory management's autonomy. In fact it is obvious that managements have to build into their equations regarding planning not only how a new line will fit with other 'Bravo' products currently being made, but indeed how they will fit with products being produced by other organisations within the 'Carva' corporation. Similarly what is happening within other sections of 'Carva' influences a decision to drop a line at 'Bravo'.

(ii) The Structure of the Workforce and the Role of Gender

Within the factory as a whole the workforce is separated into two sections, namely administration and the shopfloor/work shops. There are differences in terms of qualification and prerequisite skills for employment in these two sections, primarily due to the type of tasks performed in each

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<sup>134</sup> These changes had been caused by the change of the board of management or the change of ownership (for example, if it was taken over by different corporation).

section. If we concentrate briefly on the administrative section, it could be said that employees there required a higher level of education and a higher level of English fluency than those elsewhere in the factory.

In the administrative section the positions of general manager, financial controller, technical manager, manufacturing manager, and so on (see the organisation chart in Appendix 'A') are usually occupied by men. Women occupy jobs which have been traditionally classified as female (see Game and Pringle, 1983); they are the secretaries, the clerical assistants, the receptionists. This pattern is repeated in many companies (see Mitter, 1986 etc.).

There is a similar pattern in the hierarchical structure between the administration and the shop floor. Again men dominated the positions of power such as manager of a section and supervisor. Humphrey (1985:214) found that in most companies men are usually given the opportunity to occupy managerial and supervisory positions. The reasons behind this pattern within this factory are complex. Management stated there was no sex discrimination in selection of staff, but also conceded that selection, particularly for promotion, was the most difficult aspect of management:

*For any position we start out looking for a person who is able to demonstrate previous experience in a similar position; who has been able to demonstrate stability of employment and who can demonstrate that they have the desire and energy to succeed and fit into the work culture that exists. In our experience, for any supervisory position, it is irrelevant whether the person is male or female. The only characteristic which we could possibly call common is that they will usually fall into the age group of 30 to 45. One is usually able to obtain a close match on people between the ideal and the actual, but quite frequently one can be disappointed in the end result in that the selection process has failed to identify some characteristics of the applicant which are deleterious to his actual job performance.*

The stated factors which appear to have precluded women from positions of power within this organisation were that women had no supervisory experience due to their backgrounds, they lacked English fluency, had little education, or had different experiences of work which might be barriers to developing their abilities. However there was evidence that senior management under-estimated female skill and ability. For instance in the Post-Moulding department there were two women, one a forelady in the Paint-Shop section and the other a leading-hand in the Auto-Assembly section, who had long proven records of managing workers within their respective sections. They were not chosen by management to become the



supervisor when that position became vacant; the position was given to a man who had held a similar position in a 'Carva' corporation plant in Singapore.

Because men dominate in many departments, they have more chance to obtain higher positions within the department where they are already influential. However, in the areas where women workers were dominant their over-riding supervisors were men. This seems to indicate that men have priority in promotion to leadership positions. If men occupy most of the power positions within this factory, it must be related to the vertical mobility operating in this factory.

Within the shopfloor there were many different departments each with a separate function. Watson (1987) points out that:

*In designing the organisation, the management decides how the task to be done within the chosen technologies are to be split into various jobs and how these, in turn, are to be grouped into sections, divisions and departments. Decisions are also made about how many levels of authority there are to be as well as about such matters as the nature of communication channels and reward structures, the proportions of supervisors to supervised, the balance of centralisation to decentralisation and authority to delegation, the degree of formalisation and standardisation of procedures and instructions (1987:169).*

As discussed in chapter III, in this factory there was gender segregation into different sections. Women predominated in the Auto-Assembly and Paint-Shop.

As mentioned in chapter II, the actual capitalist division of labour in large scale industry involves the development of specialised technical and managerial functions, supervision, the establishment of specialised departments, such as tool rooms, maintenance, stores, quality control and production, and the creation of hierarchical ordering by skill within them (see Humphrey, 1985). The sexual division of labour is bound up with the capitalist division of labour as a whole, and pervades every part of it. Women generally are at the bottom of any job hierarchy. and women and men are allocated asymmetrically between different functions and categories of work. This factor leads to the position where women predominate in the low salary unskilled sections. Humphrey's ideas were, on the whole, vindicated in this factory, particularly the way in which men and women were segregated into different departments and women ended up with the 'unskilled' work.

Game and Pringle (1983:15-16) suggest a useful idea for understanding how gender distinctions are constructed and reconstituted in the workplace. They say:

*Despite the fact that jobs are always allocated as male or female with either direct reference to biology or on the basis of supposed biological differences in characteristics and abilities, there is nothing static or fixed about the sexual division of labour. The content of men's work and women's work is subject to change. Changes in definitions of men's work and women's work always take place in relation to each other. There is nothing inherent in jobs that makes them either appropriately female or male. If anything remains fixed, it is the distinction between men's work and women's work (Game and Pringle, 1983:15).*

The creation of distinctions between male and female work spheres, according to Game and Pringle (1983:16), serves to maintain male power or domination and the subordination of women. Due to transformations in the organisation of work, that which was previously designed as 'male work' changes to 'female work'. This transformation often bothers males when as a result women obtain power through it. When this occurs gender specific occupations are generally renegotiated and recreated to keep male power dominant in the workplace (Game and Pringle, 1983:16).

Game and Pringle's argument is partly vindicated by the practices in this factory. Management, when asked to comment on gender segregation, claimed it was due to biological determinism. They argued that male workers worked in the 'heavy' work areas and women did the 'light' and 'clean' work. Within the Paint-Shop, male workers were mostly given spray-painting jobs which was defined as both 'heavy' and 'skilled' work. Women were allocated work which was categorised as 'process work' and 'unskilled' work. Process work included glue-spraying which was similar to spray-painting, but spray-painting by being classified as 'male work' attracted higher wages. Process work also included several tasks which were 'heavier' than those of a male spray-painter. To obviate the injustice of this female workers were rotated so that they did not stay for long in the 'heavier' jobs. For instance, 'chain' tasks in the small room headed by Marcelle (a leading-hand) were extremely demanding and all workers on the 'chain' had to work very fast to keep up with the speed of the machine. In addition, because of the interdependence of each worker, together with the need to adjust to the speed of the machine, no-one was allowed to leave their work place unless replaced by another<sup>135</sup>. To classify this work as 'easier' and 'lighter' than spray-painting work where workers had no difficulty in leaving their jobs for a break is indefensible. The women were

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<sup>135</sup> See also 'Control Mechanisms' section in chapter V, particularly in the discussion of system of work.

'trapped' but the male spray-painters could and did stop work, often because they wanted a smoke, usually using a toilet break as the excuse. The time for mixing the paint or for adding it often became a chance for them to chat with other workers.

From the evidence in this factory one concludes that women's work is devalued and effectively leads to discrimination against them. Almost all of the female workers accepted the situation, even though they often expressed doubt that the male tasks were actually heavier than theirs. In spite of the female workers' insight into the injustice of these practices, management strategies for dealing with the 'human' factor (see below) were successful in defusing any serious resentment or difficulties with their female workforce, particularly when they used strategies which engendered feelings of job insecurity.

### C. THE HUMAN FACTOR: THE CREATION OF A WORKPLACE CULTURE

It is widely argued, both by industrial managers and within the academic literature on management issues, that the most difficult task for management is the handling of the 'human' factor. Saunders (1973:18) points out: "the most difficult task is to deal successfully with the human factor". He then emphasises that building harmonious and productive teams is always harder than solving the technical problems involved in making goods. In a similar vein Bethel, *et al.* (1971:50) reported that the interest and willing cooperation of both managers and workers are the keys to obtaining high productivity. Managers and workers, being human, are different from machines whose degree of efficiency can be measured easily, or whose speed can be adjusted when required. Humans cannot be so easily regulated to a predetermined point of productivity. Preferably, they should be led by goals which they can accept as justifiable, worthy, and fair to all concerned (Bethel, *et al.* 1971:50).

Although the 'human' factor is regarded as the most difficult task to deal with, the need for labour remains essential to develop the industry. There are different viewpoints on the way in which the management handles this issue. Wood (1989:12) mentions that the labour problem was defined as one of control and should be solved if machinery were substituted for human workers. This idea infected the attitudes of managers who sought automation in preference to human labour. Kern and Schuman (1989), Piore and Sabel (1984), among others, argue that management redefines its labour problems when labour is no longer seen as expendable. The argument asserts that today there is an increasing realization by management of the 'qualitative significance of human work performance' (Kern and Schuman, 1987:160).

In the 'Bravo' factory, management continued to see workers as humans who by definition were difficult to handle. Their solution to this was not only adopting automation where possible, but also controlling workers with many subtle techniques. The methods they adopted ranged from the criteria they adopted when selecting workers, to techniques that were used to engender loyalty to the factory and management and the practices used to encourage workers to become diligent, efficient and productive. The significant first step was the selection of an individual worker.

(i) The Selection of Workers<sup>136</sup>

The selection of a worker has to be related to the nature of the task, but it would be illogical for management to wish to select inexperienced workers. However, if a task can be done by anyone, then management has the opportunity to select workers without special skills. This brings some advantages in terms of labour cost, acceptance of work conditions and ultimately of worker control.

In the areas within this factory where this research was carried out only some tasks, those requiring paint work, required people with appropriate skills and experience. The vast majority of the tasks could be done by inexperienced, unskilled personnel. When selecting a worker, management not only considered their ability and experience, but also their sense of duty. This was an advantage migrant applicants appeared to have over Australian-born applicants.

There is a contradiction between the stated views of management and their practice when it comes to employing migrants. The general manager said at interview that:

*The major problem associated with employing migrants with limited English is the difficulty in communicating, by way of training and education, the job skills necessary to succeed in today's very demanding competitive market.*

Nevertheless large numbers of migrant women, predominately from non-English-speaking countries, were integrated into the shop floor of this factory. In the Post-Moulding department the latest workers were also migrants.

It appears the work-tasks created in the factory were designated as unskilled jobs in order to reduce the cost of labour. Workers employed did not undergo formal training so it would appear the general manager's statement that poor English language skills was a problem when hiring

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<sup>136</sup> I should mention that this discussion primarily addressed past experiences.

non-English-speaking workers is unsubstantiated. Indeed, instead of creating disadvantages for the factory, the selection of migrant women employees was of benefit to management. Management had an expectation that these women would be more obedient than people with fluent English. Their lack of English fluency did not hinder their capability as workers. Sophia, a leading hand in the Auto-Assembly, who has supervised many workers for several years, supported this idea through her experience. She said:

*I think, and even I have proved it that people from non-English-speaking countries are good workers since they pay more attention when their bosses explained them their job. Besides, they always ask to the superior whether they do right thing or not. This perhaps because they realise their weaknesses. On the other hand, Australians, or people with English fluency, often do not listen carefully and even do not care when the bosses explain things to them, because they think that they will definitely understand. The result will be unsatisfactory because they make mistakes, everything will be wrong.*

A supervisor interviewed also explained why migrant men and women, rather than Australians, dominated this factory's workforce. He said:

*How many Australians are coming here? Only a few Australians have come here. This is because Australians do not like to work with strict time where tea break, lunch time must be conducted in the exact time. Australians enjoy working in the condition where they can relax, they can smoke and talk. Australians, therefore, separate into different kinds of job. Before we got some Australians, but they mostly did not stay long. They tended to be disobedient. For instance, they write dirty stuff in the toilet or they open the tap which resulted in the water flooding in the toilet floor. Another experience is that an Australian painter worked here before, he always came late every morning. He often told lies. One day, he said that he got an accident on the way to work. Therefore, he asked for money. When we checked on the day he had an accident, we found that day was a stop-work. It is clear that he told a lie. Another day, he did the same thing where at the stop-work he admitted to have an accident. After that he never appeared again. Perhaps, he felt embarrassed. Of course, not all Australians are tricky. A few people are still here and they are good.*

By employing migrant women this company found they were able to deal with the 'human' problems more successfully because the migrant women were more susceptible to the techniques they used. However, another important way to deal with the so called 'human' factor is to create effective relationships between workers and particularly between management and worker.

(ii) The Relationships: Between the Ideal and the Real

The ideal relationship between management and workers, from a management perspective, is one in which profits are maximised. Saunders (1973) emphasises that in dealing with people a company needs to treat its workforce as "individuals and not as cogs in a machine"; moreover he argues that the links between workers are also very important (1973:18). Saunders using a mechanical analogy to describe the organisation within a factory states:

*The organization of the employees in the factory [resemble] a number of radiating chains in which each link is vital, rather than as a collection of gear wheels in which there are many similar cogs (1973:18).*

As a consequence, he argues, management is required to take into account human relationships.

Bethel *et al.* (1971:50) also writing on this issue, noted that:

*It has been proved many times that the application of good human relations "pays off" through cooperative coordination and hence greater productivity.*

He went on to claim that good human relations within organisations will not eventuate without management developing workers' understanding of :

- (1) the goals which are common to the various members of the organisation and to the organisation as a whole; and
- (2) an understanding of the interrelationship of jobs and the significance of any one job to the total product of the company (Bethel, *et al.* 1971:50).

It appears that it is very important for the 'Bravo' management to be aware of workers' feelings. The general manager articulated his perspective of the ideal work place relationships as follows:

*The ideal relationship between workers and management is one of harmony fostered by a belief that we are all working for a common cause towards a common goal. The concept is fostered that there is no division between workers and management; rather it is groups of people performing different functions for the benefit of the enterprise. The above situation is created by having regular meetings which are comprised of both management and workers and by removing from those meetings and the workplace in general any evidence or indication that there is a difference in status between any two people in the organisation. If the adversarial role is removed from the enterprise the total energy of the enterprise can be directed towards what should be the primary focus of the enterprise, that is to produce quality parts in the right quantities at the lowest possible cost. This is not possible in an organisation where relationships and loyalties are divided.*

This ideal situation would not be easy to achieve, rather it requires certain conditions. Bethel, *et al.* (1971) suggest that the main prerequisite for the creation of understanding between management and workers is effective communication (1971:50).

It may be correct that regular meetings will lead to better communication, but in the 'Bravo' factory management did not organise regular meetings. According to the workers I interviewed, the only meetings attended by workers inside the factory were union meetings. There also existed a huge status distance between workers and administration. For example, almost all of the workers in the Auto-Assembly and the Paint-Shop knew neither their general manager nor the administrative staffs in the office which was located in the front of the factory. Important-looking individuals who often came to see David (their direct manager) were simply assumed by the workers to be their 'big' boss. Moreover, shop-floor workers usually only associated with the co-workers in the same department and those with whom they had a direct relation because of work<sup>137</sup>. As mentioned in chapter III, the Auto-Assembly shared a huge room with other sections. Though the workers shared the room, worked side by side from year to year, they did not talk to each other. They had different times to start working, to take breaks and to finish working. They did not have a chance to associate with each other. It would seem the general manager's perspective was a long way from the reality which existed within this factory.

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<sup>137</sup> For instance, the workers in the Auto-Assembly and in the Paint-Shop got in touch with Marlon and Nicole from Quality Control. It was because Marlon and Nicole's tasks were to check finished components made by them.

Infrequent communication does not always mean ineffective communication, nor does frequent communication guarantee effective intercourse between workers and management. Infrequent, appropriate communication, effectively aimed, can result in practical outcomes. At the 'Bravo' factory communication between management and workers is minimal, therefore establishing effective communication between workers and their bosses is difficult. This factory has the additional problem that the workforce consists of several different ethnic groups with English as the only common language. Most of the individuals within these groups have poor or non-existent English language skills. Communication is also compounded by the fact that there are status divisions based on hierarchies of rank and length of employment within the workforce. This causes problems in communication as workers try to deal through broken English with potentially subtle factors such as showing respect, or, in some cases, fear of the person they are addressing because of their status within the organisation.

To management, the creation of harmonious relationships among workers is recognised as vitally important. If there is conflict between even a small number of workers this will encourage disharmony. This discord in turn often influences larger numbers of workers and becomes a serious problem for management, particularly in situations where teams with individuals reliant on each other are required for production. Conflict among workers in these situations leads to inefficient and insufficient production.

In the Post Moulding section of this factory awareness by management of disharmonious relationships led them to adopt their paternalistic strategy of inserting the romantic notion of the workplace being analogous to family life<sup>138</sup>.

The use of this strategy led to the rise of questions regarding the degree of fairness to everybody exhibited by the bosses. Not everyone felt they were treated fairly or equally, rather some workers felt there was some discrimination. If factory management regarded the workforce as one family, then some workers felt they were treated as step-children, whilst others were treated as 'real' children.

The manager indicated that there were substantial differences culturally and economically between European workers and Asian workers (such as Vietnamese). The European workers, he claimed, worked moderately hard whilst the Asians worked very hard.

Moreover, the manager recognised that most of the European workers in this factory were stable financially, their children had grown up and their families back 'home' were coping financially so that they

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<sup>138</sup> See section on 'Control Mechanisms' in chapter V for detail of this strategy.



required little or no support. By contrast, the Asian workers needed to support their nuclear families in Australia, usually consisting of young dependent children. These workers would work any overtime required. In addition to the care of their families in Australia they were required to meet the economic expectations of their poverty-stricken extended families back 'home'. These are obligations which their culture does not permit them to relinquish. As a result their current economic burden is heavier than that of their European co-workers.

Furthermore, the manager reported that the way in which these two groups mixed socially within the workplace was also different. The Europeans were more adaptable. They could and did associate relatively easily across ethnic lines. By contrast, the Asians, in particular the Vietnamese, appeared to enjoy mixing only with their co-ethnics. They rarely mixed with others, thus there was little possibility of improvement to their English fluency skills. This in turn led to barriers to effective communication.

The manager's impression of these two groups of workers was not always justified. My observation showed that Vietnamese workers, particularly those who worked as spray-painters often chatted and made jokes with non-Vietnamese. Kam, for instance, was a friendly person. I saw that he often talked to Effie, Katherine, Wiji (before her leaving) and others. Manager's attitude toward the Asian workers may possibly have been influenced by racist views. Thus the sense of discrimination which arose effectively had its roots in 'false' impressions of the culturally unfamiliar 'other'.

Building effective workplace relationships is difficult because they are fraught with the whole complexity of individual, interpersonal, and social skills. As discussed previously, the ties of being a co-ethnic and the length of the relationship are for some workers significant factors in the forming of good work relationships. If one is dealing with a friend it is easy to deal with misunderstanding or conflict. If however, a co-worker is not an easy-going type who does not like to mix with others, or to talk to people who are not close to them, then difficulties arise.

Another example of the difficulties involved in building effective workplace relationships has to do with the attitudes of middle management personnel. The immediate boss on the Post-Moulding section did not use consistent techniques for handling workers. He attempted to create a warm relationship through some friendly action, but his attitude to some workers was not consistent. At times he would put his hand on the workers' shoulders, smile and cajole them into working as he wanted them to. At other times he would point his finger and rudely order workers to work harder and faster, particularly those non-European workers. This inconsistency of approach gave a very unsatisfactory impression to some workers and led them to view him with some uncertainty and suspicion.

His attitude and behaviour did not improve relationships, either with him or between other workers. Management had a definite concept of what they wanted as the ideal type of workplace culture. However, the fact is that relationships on the factory floor were far from ideal. This was partly due to the behaviour and attitudes of management and the supervisory staff, but it was also in part due to factors inherent in the type of employee selected. For example, there are problems which derive from a workforce of migrant workers by no means fluent in the English language, or those problems inherent in a workforce unused to a factory milieu. This often caused misunderstandings and communication barriers which prevented a worker's immediate supervisor from behaving in an ideal manner. Workers however, had their own strategies for coping with their workplace.

### (iii) The Workers' Diligence and Efficiency

Management techniques for fostering diligent and productive workers was explained by the general manager:

*At each work station workers are presented with process control plans, critical feature sheets relating to the product they are making and statistical process control charts which they are required to fill out every hour. In this way we assist workers to diligently control the outcome of the process which they are performing. They are also in receipt of information which indicates the standard rate at which the part should be produced.*

Basically, the assumption was that diligence and productivity could be maintained by giving workers responsibility for the products they produced. This was reinforced by instituting teamwork, usually in a chain-type situation where workers were interdependent, and where they had to adapt to each other's speed of working. In this situation, they could not stop work without a replacement worker in place. The fastest worker set the rhythm of work and the others were required to keep up<sup>139</sup>. Another technique was to use an automatic machine which required a team of workers. The machine set the pace and ensured the diligence and productivity of the workers. In the Paint-Shop there was an automatic machine for painting which required a minimum of three workers who were required to keep pace with the machine. The positioning of the machine was also an important control factor. It was located just below the manager's office and in his direct line of vision. The accounting technique, as described above by the General manager, was used where workers

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<sup>139</sup> See also the discussion of system of work in 'Control Mechanisms' section.

carried out independent jobs or worked with only one other person. The other important system used to foster diligence and productivity was the creation of incentives. Arguably this was the most significant technique used. The incentives invariably involved money. Workers who wanted overtime would work particularly diligently and productively to ensure they were chosen for the limited overtime available. This often generated conflict among workers (see also 'Pattern of Relationships Among Workers'). Not all workers wanted overtime work. Some workers were too old and they could not cope physically with the exhaustion it entailed. Others did not need the extra finance now that their children were financially independent. However, when strikes occurred overtime for all workers was virtually obligatory.

Perhaps the most difficult task relating to the 'human' factor for management was building a feeling of loyalty to the factory.

#### (iv) The Loyalty of the Workers

Creating a sense of loyalty among workers is affected by complex factors. Saunders (1973:19) notes that worker loyalty is important to a company and is not necessarily related to the salary or working conditions. He argues there are many influential factors to be considered, but the most important factor is that of a worker's feelings of security (Saunders, 1973:19). "Once a general feeling of security of employment has been established throughout, a feeling of loyalty to the company will appear in the staff even in the face of bad working conditions and low salaries" (1973:19). Saunders' argument is inadequate because the working conditions, level of salaries and the feeling of security are significant constituent elements in the worker's loyalty, and very difficult to separate out from their feelings of commitment to the firm.

Saunders (1973) emphasises that, in order to obtain a feeling of security, a company needs to avoid the strategy of firing workers (1973:19). Again, Saunders' argument is unsatisfactory if applied to the 'Bravo' factory experiences. This factory has dismissed workers at several different times and whilst it is true that this caused job insecurity, it did not always result in a diminution of loyalty to the factory. The dismissals were said to be related to the economic recession in Australia and could not be avoided. The factory was in a vulnerable position due to its dependence on the auto vehicle market. Fluctuation in factory production volumes were an exact mirror of the health or otherwise of the domestically produced vehicle market. Though the workers felt insecure, the dismissals increased their loyalty to the company because they desperately wanted to retain their jobs. However, if the general economic and labour situation were to become buoyant and it becomes easy to find work, then the feeling of insecurity would be gone, and there would perhaps be a reduction in loyalty to the company. With unemployment high and vigorous

competition for jobs, feelings of insecurity will not bring about a diminution of loyalty. Loyalty to the company therefore depends upon all the circumstances pertaining at any one time and the way in which each factor relates to the others.

It was realised by management that dismissal of workers would engender unhappy feelings in both the retrenched workers and those who remained in the factory. Saunders (1973) suggests that the alternative solution to dismissing workers is to shorten the number of hours worked. This approach results in some disadvantages for the company. The replacement of workers in each factory function requires time for adaptation, which in turn, reduces workers' production and indeed, might increase the cost of labour.

In spite of worker retrenchments, management described workers as having a fairly strong degree of loyalty to the enterprise and to their fellow workers. The general manager stated that the factory management actively endeavoured to maintain and increase this loyalty by a series of new initiatives. They instituted a regular newsletter which dealt with matters of immediate interest to workers. Inservice training, in a structured schoolroom environment, was introduced. It was designed to have the effect of enhancing the individual worker's control over the production process and of increasing the self-esteem of the workers. They began to have regular personal communication with workers. The general manager's statement was not always in congruence with the workers' viewpoint and experiences. Most of the workers believed that a regular newsletter was not really published with the workers' interests in mind. I found that it was partly a tool for management to control the workers<sup>140</sup> and was partly to fulfil the interest of particular groups, i.e. those who had an important role in the factory, such as top management, middle management and their secretaries. This can be seen through an analysis of the pattern of materials used in the newsletter. The economic condition of the factory was an important news in every publication. Recently, the economic slowdown of this factory often became the main issue<sup>141</sup> which could be one way to control the workers and could result in keeping (or increasing) the loyalty of workers to the company due to their heightened fear of losing their jobs. In this case, it was clear that instead of fulfilling the workers' interest, it was fulfilling the management's interest.

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<sup>140</sup> See 'Control Mechanisms' section, particularly in the discussion of the creation of fear.

<sup>141</sup> For instance, one article on the first page of the newsletter published in March 1991 was about the decline of the sales due to the economic downturn. It was shown that automotive sales: 21% below plan; general industrial: 10% below plan; wastemaster: 3% below plan; inter-company: 89% below plan. It was also said that the firm is now "at worst, very close to the bottom of the economic cycle" (*Newsletter*, March 1991).

Even the light-hearted 'human interest'<sup>142</sup> stories expose limitations in the managerial mind-set. Although the newsletter was intended to be a vehicle of popular communication, the people who featured in these articles were almost always about 'popular' or 'important' staff members, rather than people and experiences familiar to shop-floor workers<sup>143</sup>. Hillary's story for instance was not interesting material for the workers on the shop-floor because they did not know her and they did not associate with her. Besides, the implicit message in this kind of story was that the interests of shop-floor workers was not the target of the published newsletter.

From the above example, it seemed that management had applied various strategies to control the workers and to engender loyalty to the company.

#### D. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN 'BRAVO' AND THE CAR COMPANIES

The pattern of the automobile industry worldwide has been transformed a number of times. Tolliday and Zeitlin (1986:1) note that from the mid-1970s the 'Fordist' systems of mass production have been transformed by new strategies based on greater product diversity and more flexible methods of production. The transformation from one system to another took place in order to find a more efficient way to facilitate worldwide competition. Japanese manufacturers have been among the most successful innovators of these new techniques, and their success is manifest in their increased global sales. Japanese auto assemblers had encouraged the creation of networks of specialist suppliers clustered around a main factory which reduced dependence on imported components, facilitated continuous upgrading of models and rationalized production (Tolliday and Zeitlin, 1986:12-15).

In Australia, car companies such as Nissan, Ford, Toyota, and Mitsubitsi also went in this direction. They also tended to have specialist suppliers. The number of car component suppliers flourished after these car models were introduced. 'Bravo' was one of the factories which produced auto components from plastics. The General Manager explained to me that orders from the automobile manufacturing companies for

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<sup>142</sup> Including funny stories, new born babies and so on.

<sup>143</sup> For instance, one article on the newsletter published in March 1991 was about how Hillary, a secretary of a manager could not find a way to return to her office in the forepart of the factory after coming to the shop-floor. It was written: "Item lost:- If anybody should find a certain secretary wandering around the factory, would you please return her to [Mark]'s office. The poor soul has only worked here for about 4 years !! and couldn't find the Paint Shop ! (map of factory layout available at reception)" (Newsletter, March 1991).

products were obtained by a tender selection process, and that although there were no formal contracts involved, an understanding existed with the car-makers that orders would not be moved without consultation, nor were there regular negotiations on contracts or price.

The advantages in the relationship between the automobile manufacturers and the specialist suppliers, of which 'Bravo' was one, lay in favour of the automobile companies and whilst these contracts were relatively stable, the factory was totally vulnerable to market fluctuations in the sale of automobiles. Production volumes in the factory were an exact mirror of the health or otherwise of the domestically produced vehicle market.

Because of its obvious dependence on the automobile companies, the 'Bravo' factory management was able to use this as a strategy to control their workforce. They could use it as reason for reducing their workforce, or to encourage workers to increase their productivity. All management had to do was inform the workers that the factory would lose the order for products if the workers did not work hard or efficiently. In their search for ways of motivating their workers, they never moved far from a dependence on fear.

## F. CONCLUSION

As a part of a multinational corporation, 'Bravo' was loosely integrated to the parent company. This could be seen through its autonomy to make decisions about the running of the factory and about other critical areas. Based on the process of hiring and firing workers, and the type of products made, I explored the actual degree of management autonomy in this factory. There were many ways in which the factory has recruited the employees, but the most important method for recruiting workers was through informal networks. The policy of dismissals, which had been rationalised to employees by reference to the economic slowdown, was largely under the autonomous control of this factory's management. Yet the autonomy of this factory was necessarily limited by the strategic decisions of the corporate headquarters (eg. offshore investment), and such decisions had a devastating impact on the factory.

In the structure of the workforce, men dominated the positions of power. 'Lack of experience' was proffered by management as a reason why women were excluded from such positions. Men and women were segregated into different departments and women ended up with the 'unskilled' process work. According to Game and Pringle (1983) gender is constructed and reconstituted in the workplace as circumstances change, and the distinction between men's work and women's work is always there. Though 'women's jobs' were often devalued, most of the female workers accepted the situation. The strategies of engendering a feeling of

insecurity and the management's strategies for dealing with the 'human' factor were also significant factors influencing the workers' acceptance of their fate.

The 'human' factor is regarded as the hardest task to deal with. 'Bravo' gave the greatest attention to strategies of selecting of workers, techniques of engendering loyalty to the company and incentives aimed at encouraging workers to work diligently. Large numbers of migrant women, predominantly from non-English-speaking countries, were integrated into the shop floor of this factory. The lack of English did not become a constraint to their output.

To management of this factory, harmonious relationships among the employees is considered to be important to the proper running of the factory. However, the ideal situation has proven difficult to achieve. Complications in which the gap among the different type of workers remained all too obvious were experienced by management, in spite of some uneven management rhetoric. The creation of workers' loyalty to the company and workers' diligence were not easily achieved, but this factory had one strategic way of doing so. Workers were frightened about the future of their jobs. They were confronted with the recession and with their dependence on the auto industry. Fear encouraged hard work and loyalty of a sort. Backed by a fairly transparent atmosphere of personal patronage, the effectiveness of the union, and adequate communication of these basic economic conditions, workers clung to the company as the only clear way of holding their jobs.





## CHAPTER VII DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Can we understand women's oppression as a product of capitalism or does it go beyond that? I sought to explain this question and other related issues by means of empirical research which was primarily directed at the connection between women's subordination in society and the social relations of work that are associated with capitalism. Specifically, I looked at a factory in Australia which employed a large number of migrant women. This was particularly fruitful as I had previously investigated the situation of women factory workers in Indonesia. My research showed that the gap between Third World low-wage factories in less industrialised countries like Indonesia and an already industrialised country like Australia is not an absolute one. The differences are there, but there are also important similarities. Indeed, many of the questions and issues which arose from this research were alike. The questions which I have addressed in this thesis are, I feel, central to any understanding of the complex situation of migrant women factory workers in Australia. To reiterate. Firstly, it is necessary to take a reasonably holistic look at the women factory workers; that is, not only to consider the work they do and the conditions that they work under, but also the reasons behind their labour force participation and 'who they are'. Moreover, what are the dynamics of labour control in the narrower and wider contexts and what strategies do the workers adopt to survive? What is the role of the union and how is this role perceived by the workers? And lastly, what are the workers' prospects and how do they perceive their current work?

In order to understand the dynamics of migrant women's wage labour in any part of Australian manufacturing industry such as in the 'Bravo' case (from the motor vehicle components industry), it was necessary to consider initially the theoretical context before commencing the empirical exploration which my later chapters provided. Thus, in chapter II I discussed what I feel to be the major elements of this context, these being: the changing role of women workers in the contemporary global economy; the enduring question of patriarchy and the arguments about women's place in capitalist society; and the characteristics of migrant women's work in Australia.

One of the main challenges in this field is to arrive at a satisfactory theoretical analysis that accounts for the near ubiquity of factories worked by low-wage female labour throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Theories which posit a New International Division of Labour offer one approach which attempts to understand the globalisation of capitalism and to account for the underlying trend behind the recent industrial transformation. As I have explained in chapter II, the New International Division of Labour account seeks amongst other things to advance reasons

for the position of women in the global economy, in particular the special place they have in the new labour-intensive industries in industrialising countries. It also shows the direct connection between the growth of these new 'offshore' plants and the weakened position of female factory workers in advanced countries. It could be argued that the ability of a firm in an advanced country to move their production to take advantage of cheap labour in the Third World has the direct effect of weakening the bargaining power of first-world workers and thereby undermines these workers' rights.

Though this NIDL perspective has some drawbacks, it is useful from at least two points of view. By providing a systemic account of the reasons behind the movement of investment capital to new industrialising countries, it shows why the bargaining power of unskilled labour in the advanced countries has declined so sharply, and contributes a partial explanation of why industries that do not move are turning to new methods and new technologies - a shift which many observers like to call 'post-Fordist'.

Controversy surrounds the assertion that industrial production has entered a post-Fordist stage. The optimists suggest that this stage has emerged unambiguously, and is accompanied by the development of new technologies, labour flexibility, multiskilled labour, decentralisation of decision-making, and team work (see Matthews, 1989:89). Whether or not it signals the end of 'Fordism' there do exist clear trends towards multiskilling in industrial workplaces in Australia (see Ford, 1991). The implications of this trend for women is gloomy; in planning this 'transition', the interests of women are usually ignored (see Baldock, 1991). There is uncertainty regarding the nature of work that might be available under the new regime of production to many categories of workers. Besides, there is still a lot of debate about whether we are in transition to a post-Fordist stage of industrialism.

The issue of patriarchy is the most fundamental since it draws our attention to the systematic subordination of women in work and in society through patterns of domination that extend across many national and cultural boundaries, and persists through otherwise profound historical transformations, such as the emergence of industrial society. Feminist scholars differ, however, on the degree to which patriarchy is linked to particular socio-economic systems and cultures. Hartmann (1981) argues, for example, that patriarchy and capitalism are the main sources of women's oppression. Others insist that patriarchy transcends the particularities of capitalism. Yet others, such as Curthoys (1988), question the usefulness of the concept itself. Indeed, some argue that women's subordination should not to be understood in universal terms since different women have radically different experiences and life chances, such as the differences pointed out by Walby (1989) between whites and

non-whites. However, while the lasting and most deeply entrenched roots of oppression based on gender are reproduced in many other institutional settings besides the workplace, my study directly addressed a part of contemporary society where women's subordination appears clear, systemic and consistent across national and cultural boundaries: their predominant presence in a great many of the labour-intensive sectors of industry, both in industrialised and industrialising countries. The size and significance of the female industrial labour force is indisputable.

Clearly, if one reviews the research done on migrant women factory workers in Australia and the Third World, (or women factory workers elsewhere) as I have done in chapter II, there exist striking similarities.

All the theories that I have reviewed produce questions which bear upon the changes in the working environment experienced by the women who worked in the 'Bravo' factory. Indeed, my fieldwork there has resulted in the questioning of some of the assertions made by these theories. My challenge to their claims lies in the evidence of my fieldwork itself. My research therefore not only needs to invoke these theories to account for the trends I have observed, but also brings into focus aspects of the social dynamics of industrial work which are not adequately explained by them.

The evidence of my research indicated that women's subordination in the labour market cannot be simply explained as a product of capitalism. It also went beyond that. Patriarchal relations were clearly observable, particularly in the exercise of control over workers. In this part of manufacturing industry continued tension derives from global industrial competition, and in this corporate struggle to survive, management is compelled to control labour power, particularly that of women wage labourers. A combination of several modes of control has effectively resulted in migrant workers' obedience and subordination. Each mode of control reinforced the others. For instance, the technical control of workers may not become an effective tool without being supported by other types of control. Workers have developed their own strategies to counter the rigid control over them. These strategies often did not work smoothly without gaining co-workers' co-operation.

Complications were experienced by management due to global restructuring; it was seen to be necessary to make their workforce internationally competitive. Computer controls for injection-moulding machines were adopted as were robots for trimming blow-moulded products ([Bravo] Annual Report 1990: 7). In addition, as was mentioned in chapter IV, the factory conducted 'in-plant training' in response to economic problems, involving Injection & Blow Moulding and Maintenance. The departments which were improved consisted primarily of male workers. By contrast, women who mostly performed process work in the Post-Moulding saw no changes in their job. The general manager clearly stated that migrant women without English skills have become a

barrier in the up-grading of their workforce; a necessary step in today's competitive market. Clearly, the global restructuring of manufacturing industry is one of the ways businesses have to deal with the local problem of recession and the international battle for market share on a global scale. As mentioned above the restructuring itself varies, including multiskilling and deskilling. The evidence of my research shows that in particular, unskilled process workers were passed over for retraining schemes, the excuse being 'language difficulties'. The problem of language can be reduced through interpreting, particularly for Italian women who were the majority of the workers.

Even if management adopts a post-Fordist approach to industrial relations, which would give more autonomy to the workers to develop their own initiatives, the fact of control over labour power by management within capitalism remains unchanged. This in fact can lead to some tension between what management does on the one hand, and the necessity of control on the other hand, together with the need for creating harmonious relationships. The tensions and contradictions were even further complicated by the continued manipulation of cultural and political factors, such as gender relationships. The exploitation of ethnicity is another element as well. I feel that management has unsuccessfully addressed these tensions. If it follows a post-Fordist model, the 'big family' rhetoric in reality leaves big gaps between the actual and the ideal.

The mechanisms of control rely upon relations of dominance and subordination which are not established within the factory itself but which draw upon broader relationships within society as whole. Among these relationships gender and ethnicity, two characteristics that migrant women embody, have been used as resources in strategies of labour control. There was much evidence which supported this argument. The incorporation of one ethnic group from a non-English-speaking background as the majority of the workers has resulted in a tight bond among co-ethnics which in turn not only affected the undermining of the power of resistance<sup>144</sup>, but also established a reliance upon, and obedience to co-ethnic bosses.

The selection of migrant women workers from non-English speaking backgrounds has a number of benefits for management, such as their supposed docility. It has been widely argued that female factory workers in the developing countries are docile and easy to control. The particular backgrounds of workers contribute to the degree of docility. Mather (1982) found that female factory workers in Tangerang (Indonesia) were obedient to the company partly due to their religious background, namely Islam. So religion may be another cultural element in the matrix of control.

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<sup>144</sup> It is aware that the low degree of resistance is a complex element which may be affected by the lack of English skills, the management's power to undermine it, and so on.

I believe that religion is not the only cause of women's subordination, rather it is a much more complex interplay of cultural, historical and political factors. The educational level and social background of female factory workers in the 'Bravo' factory and in developing countries are very similar. Perhaps, the migrant workers' submissiveness was affected by their background. In addition, the lack of English skills has become a major constraint for the workers, preventing them from understanding their situation exactly, and operating as a barrier to their rights. The migrant women in this factory gained more advantages (particularly in terms of wages and rights) than factory women in the developing countries in general since union involvement and state regulations have been different.

There is no doubt that unions have contributed to the improvement of the conditions for female workers. These benefits range from increased pay rates to improved working conditions. The unions' power to negotiate with employers, however, is not fixed. It may decrease or increase depending on certain circumstances, such as the state of the economy. If the country is wealthy, it may be easier for the unions to improve the workers' conditions, but if economic conditions are in decline the unions may find it difficult to do so. In the Post Moulding department the strength of the union was adversely affected by the recession. The inability of the union to protect some workers from dismissal was one of the examples of the union's limitations in maintaining its strength. Striking as a weapon to undermine the power of the employer more often than not proved to be an ineffective weapon. This was observable through management's ability to ask workers to work overtime after a strike. The willingness of workers to make up for strike losses by working overtime has been criticised by the shop stewards. However, the shop stewards' attitude towards the implementation of this was often contradictory, since they too shared the sense of alienation from management and the union. Thus, the shop stewards also worked overtime. A combination of the workers' fear of losing their jobs due to high unemployment and the effective control of management over the workers, were also the significant reasons for the impotence of union strategies. Thus the management side rather than the union's was chosen by the workers.

The decline in the union's power to protect and improve their workers can be viewed as an indication of the diminishing gap between the position of workers in this multinational corporation factory here in Australia and that of female factory workers in the developing countries.

Moreover, a combination of the fear of losing their jobs and the lack of understanding of their rights (due to problems of communication) have affected the workers ability to obtain their rights. As mentioned in Chapter III the workers' right to ask for job rotation due to health problems did not work for these two reasons. Carol preferred to keep working on one job rather than to ask her leading-hand to rotate her to different jobs even

though it increased her strain by doing so. What one can learn from this is that although workers have rights, the realisation of these rights is difficult. In the developing countries, workers' rights were often limited because of government policy implemented to entice foreign investment (see Mitter, 1986). I suspect that, if the union's power to protect workers continues declining, the gap between workers' rights in this factory and the workers' rights in developing countries may decrease dramatically.

The general absence of career structures has been accepted by the majority of workers without complaint. This silence was partly affected by two main points - the reluctance to shoulder new responsibilities and the feeling of inferiority because of the lack of English. The absence of career structures for women factory workers was not occurring only in this factory, but was common in both advanced and developing countries. The principles of operation of these firms in all of their production sites remains the same. Within the capitalist division of labour, the treatment of unskilled workers is not all the same. Some can be separated on grounds such as gender and ethnicity in order to achieve greater control and greater profit. The manipulation of gender differences occurs at many levels and even enters into the determination of what counts as 'skilled' labour.

Finally, due to the dynamic of social relations at work, I am aware that what I found in my fieldwork is subject to change. It would be illuminating to continue to study production sites such as 'Bravo', as technological, social and political changes develop. For instance, it would be interesting to see the affect of the recent (November 1992) legislation by the Kennett state government on workers rights and industrial relations because they will have quite a profound effect on the right of workers to strike and the power of union to back up the workers. The new legislation will give more power to management and thus intimidate the workers further.

I feel that there is still a significant need for research central upon the everyday reality of migrant women's working experiences and potential problems that they may encounter. This need was an important motivating factor for my thesis.

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Figure 3.1  
The Age of Female Workers

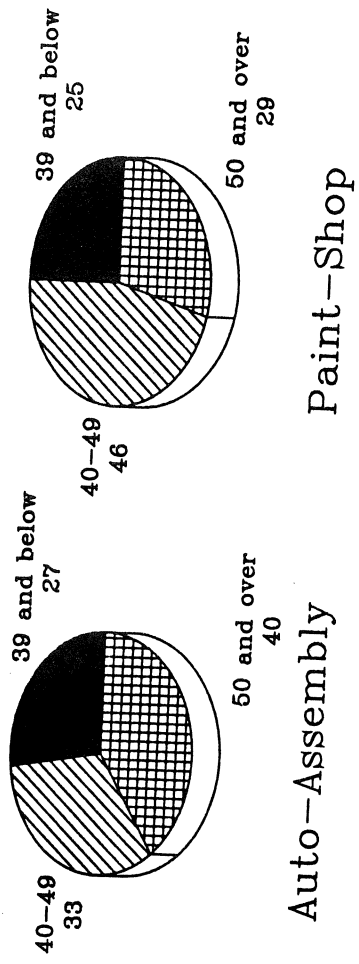
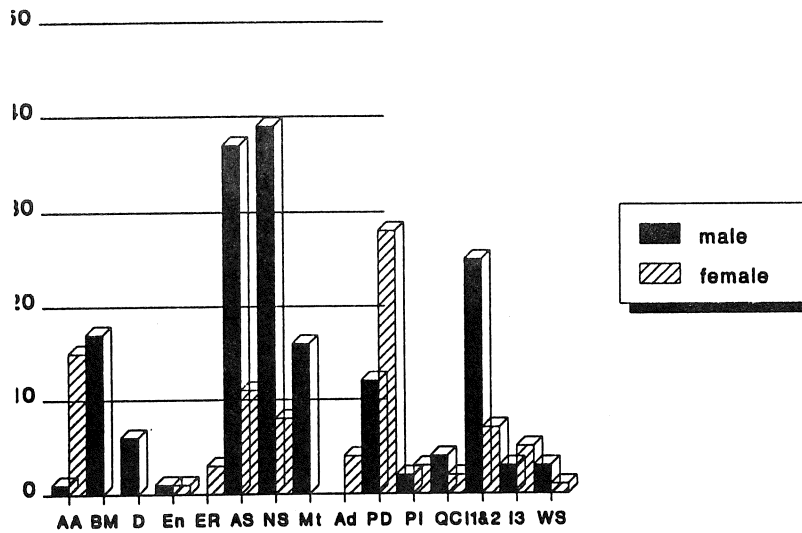




Figure 3.2  
Employee Breakdown by Department and Shift



Note:

Source: Factory management, 1991

\* (see below): The majority of Afternoon Shift and Night Shift worked in the Blow-Moulding and Injection Shops 1&2.

AA: Auto-Assembly  
 BM: Blow-Moulding  
 D: Despatch  
 En: Engineering  
 ER: Employee Relations  
 AS: Afternoon Shift\*  
 NS: Night Shift\*  
 Mt: Maintenance  
 Ad: Administration  
 PD: Paint & Decoration  
 PI: Planning  
 QC: Quality Control  
 I1&2: Injection Shops 1&2  
 I3: Injection Shop 3  
 WS: WIP Store

Figure 4.1  
Workers Viewpoint On Strike

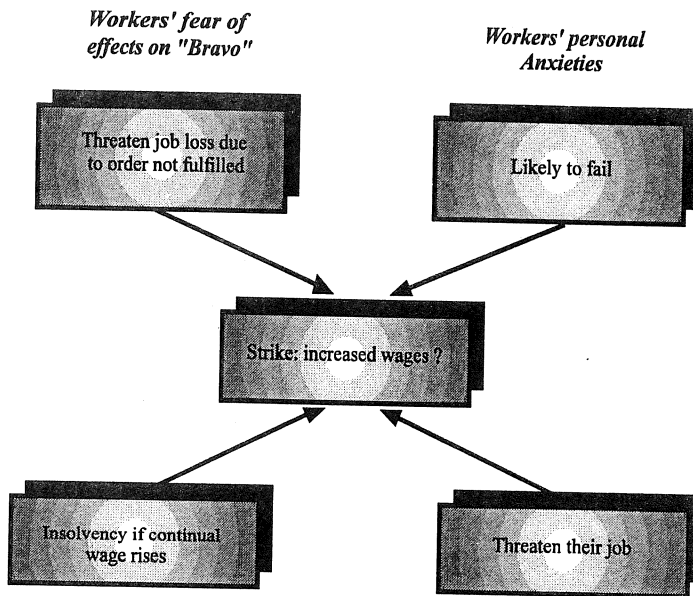


Figure 5.1  
Organisation Chart of Post Moulding Department

