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**Permanent restructuring in the automotive
industry and its implications for labour**

Clelia Li Vigni, PhD Candidate

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A premise

Public/political debate → focused on job loss, relocations, ICE vs BEV;

Union debate → 'emergency' mode on job losses and lack of production;

Academic debate → much of the analysis on work organisation transformations/lean production has focused on work intensification, but without in-depth analysis on the implications for workers/working conditions and the specific mechanisms underpinning said work intensification.

The automotive industry in Italy & France

PERMANENT RESTRUCTURING

A comprehensive and diversified process pursued by management that relies on the **continued intensification of concessions extracted from labour** in order to create the ground for capital accumulation (Siemiatycki, 2013); involves the steady **decrease of production volumes, workforce** and fosters the **deterioration of the social relations on the shopfloor** (Carbonell & Pardi, 2025; Li Vigni, 2025).

Permanent restructuring & working conditions

- **emptying** of the **industrial relations** arena (managerial unilateralism and/or union information without consultation at all levels – EWC, company, shopfloor);
- **changes** in the **organisation of work** (in this case, without establishing a specific, codified model of work);
- **erosion of social ties** and fostering workers' **individualisation** through a fear regime.

→ produces a **sharp deterioration in working conditions**, with both **physical** and **mental implications**

Working conditions deterioration I

- **work intensification** and heightened **physical/mental stress**;
 - reduction of workforce greater than reduction of volumes
 - no dissaturation
 - policy of maximum rationalisation
 - engine mix

They are introducing recycled robots, they saw that they could not increase the speed of the line. So they are thinking about taking the production away from the robot and have people do it. Whatever the robot can't do, they'll add it to the worker's workload... and **dissaturations are risible, almost non-existent... if you blow your nose, you've missed the chassis.** (SEV_4_B1)

This transformation **has made vehicle assembly more complex**, more difficult. As a result, we kept the petrol and the diesel engine, then we added the hybrid and the electric. So we increased the diversity. When people see a car coming they say, "If it's hybrid I have to do this, if it's electric I have to do that". So it is **more difficult to memorise all the tasks to be done.** (MUL_2)

Working conditions deterioration I

- **work intensification** and heightened **physical/mental stress**;
 - lack of work organisation
 - productive mix & premiumisation

The worker no longer has the possibility of having direct control over the operations, since there is no longer any calculation (...) **discretion has become the only tool for measuring saturation times** and the result that has come from this is, in my opinion, is an **increase in exploitation of at least 30%** on almost all the tasks, both on the assembly lines and on the indirect ones. (CAS_5_A1)

They play on the mix, which means that they often change the model of the LCV on the line, and the game is that **on some technologies you have to work more**, on some less. But oftentimes they will have the **models of LCV which you have to work more on pass on the line more frequently, because these make them more profit** (SEV_3_A3).

Working conditions deterioration II

- exacerbation of **control and coercion** on the shopfloor
 - digitalisation and surveillance
 - ‘fear regime’ due to crisis, lack of production, management whipsawing
 - managerial discretion on shifts and work stations
 - vulnerability for precarious and migrant workforce

We go through phases of **pure coercion**. It can last a month, two months, three months, the time it takes for somewhat grumpy or dissatisfied employees to fall into line. After that there is some relaxation. When social discontent starts to rise despite the coercion, then the pressure is eased a little. (MUL_5_M1)

Now, with computers, **even the smallest mistake can be traced back to you**, and you are called, like in Western movies. **They treat you in front of 15 or 16 other people**, with the supervisor telling you that you cannot work like that. The mental strain of being in a chain, being watched all the time, without seeing anyone else in your team... (SOX_3_FD)

Working conditions deterioration III

- **constraining** scope of intervention of **trade unions**
 - lack of codified work organisation
 - marginalisation of unions and lack of consultation
 - individual rather than collective requests
 - role of social support rather than representation (servicing model)

But the problem now isn't about the good times we once had. This divide-and-conquer conflict has always existed, but **now there's simply no time to discuss something that's not working**. In two or ten minutes, you can't do anything. (CAS_2_A3)

It's mostly **individual motivations**. We don't get many collective requests. They're mostly requests like, "Hey, I want to leave. **How do I leave the company? Can you set up an appointment with social services for me?** There's a mistake on my paycheck. My boss won't listen to me. I can't do anything. I'm sick. (SOX_3_S2)

Travail, usure mentale (Dejours, 1980)

First published by French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst **Christophe Dejours** in 1980, with successive editions of the volume published in 1990, 2000 and 2008.

A book on **labour psychopathology**, focusing on **workers' suffering**, individual and collective defense and mental pathologies deriving from work; it identifies the **work organisation** as the connecting link between the realm of the psyche with that of labour studies.

Dejours makes the argument that **mental pathologies** have been **intensifying** and new forms of work organisation have destabilised the basis of human-labour relationship.

Travail, usure mentale (Dejours, 1980)

“When the collective tolerance threshold [on production rhythms] is not reached, it may still happen that **a worker is no longer able to keep up with the pace or maintain their mental balance**. They are offered **two solutions**: leave their job, change jobs or change companies. All these options fall under the category of **turnover**. The second solution is **absenteeism**. **Even if they know they are not ill in the strict sense of the word, workers who are exhausted or on the verge of a psychoneurotic breakdown cannot leave the factory without providing detailed explanations. In the factory, mental suffering and fatigue are forbidden**. Only physical illness is acceptable. Inevitably, the outcome here is individual (...) medical examination hides the mental distress: it is the process of medicalisation (...), which aims to **empty suffering of its mental component**.”

“If the **stress of work organisation can cause physical as well as mental illness**, even in the absence of a harmful working environment, it is because the mental system is not simply a compartment of the body alongside the muscles, sensory organs and internal organs. **Mental life** is also a level of integration of the functioning of the various organs. **Its destructuring has repercussions on physical and mental health**.”

Outcomes

There's also **burnout**. You don't necessarily realize it, but when you work with good friends for 10 or 15 years, you don't notice the burnout the guy has suffered. **Suddenly, he's out of control. You know about the family crisis, the alcoholism**, how he's coping with work, you realize it. (SOX_3_FD)

It is common for young people to **stop working and stay at home due to psychosocial risks, taking pills**, and so on. For a year, a year and a half. (SOX_3_S3)

There has been an intensification of exploitation due to the introduction of a new work metric that has significantly reduced breaks and intensified production rhythms. This new metric system, **Ergo UAS, which is not applied correctly, has cut time, steps, movements, causing the worker to become similar to a robot**. From this, new pathologies have arisen, not only affecting the **musculoskeletal system, but also problems related to irritability, anxiety, depressive states**. (SEV_5)

Outcomes

Absenteeism, or resistance of last resort: workers' defence strategies to work intensification and managerial responses in the automotive industry

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This article analyzes **absenteeism in the automotive industry as a form of worker resistance against the intensification of production rhythms**. Using Labour Process Theory, the study contends that amidst individualization and trade union power erosion, workers retreat to absenteeism – an individual, unorganized response – **as resistance of last resort in order to physically and mentally recover** from the intensity of assembly-line work. Ultimately, the article advances an understanding of absenteeism as emerging from the **interplay between the social relations of production, management practices, and mechanisms of coercion and consent**.



Thank you!

clelia.livigni@sns.it

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