Worker Displacement and Resilience: A Case Study of a Prolonged Lockout among Grain Processing Workers in America’s Heartland

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“To work is to be and not to work is not to be.”

On August 22, 2008, just a few days short of Labor Day weekend, approximately 360 workers were locked out of Grain Processing Corporation Inc. (GPC) in Muscatine, Iowa, after the company and the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) Local 86D failed to reach an agreement during contract negotiations. GPC, which is a worldwide marketer of corn-based products, has its headquarters in Muscatine and is one of the community’s chief employers. At the time of the lockout, many of the locked out workers and their union representatives anticipated the company and the union would continue negotiating their differences and quickly come to an agreement on a new collective bargaining contract. As demonstrated by UFCW 86D President Tony Newton’s statements to the local newspaper within hours of the lockout: “When this is settled, we’re going to walk back in there and earn our wages…We’re going to do our job, and make the company money” (Meyer, 2008). They certainly did not anticipate the prolonged and on-going labor dispute this lockout would come to represent. As the early weeks of the lockout progressed into months and it became evident to the locked out workers that contract negotiations were going nowhere, they became more and more pessimistic regarding the likelihood of the company and the union reaching an agreement and returning to work. As the lockout dragged on, workers and their families lost their company benefits, unemployment benefits ran out, and the union’s funds dried up. Predictions of the workers and their families’ fates became dire.

Yet today, nearly six years into what has become the longest lockout in U.S. history, even the most casual of observers would have to agree that while everything is not necessarily rosy, many of the locked out workers have gotten on with their lives even as they have relinquished any
hopes of going back to work for the company. In many cases it appears that if one assesses not just changes in hourly wage, but quality of life and future expectations one might even conclude that the GPC lockout had a far less negative impact on the workers and their families than first predicted. This is not to suggest that workers and their families did not face hardships as a result of being displaced from work, rather it is to call attention to the remarkable perseverance and resilience demonstrated by these workers and their families in the face of such hardships.

Preliminary research suggests that many of the workers affected by the GPC lockout have adapted to their displacement from the company by restructuring their lives, while remaining in the local community. How this was done and how workers reflect on the experience of being displaced from GPC is a fundamental insight to be drawn from this study. This study will also assess: (a) What hardships did the workers and their families experienced as a result of being locked out? (b) What factors best explain the degree of resilience among the locked out workers and their families? (c) What does this lockout and its aftermath tell us about a potential “culture of resilience” among industrial workers in the so-called “new economy”? (d) What are the lessons to be learned by unions seeking to better address labor disputes and lockouts specifically, and industrial restructuring more generally? This study aims to offer a greater understanding of the relationship between industrial restructuring, the displacement of manufacturing workers, and the employment mobility and agency of these displaced workers in the contemporary economy.

Initial research based on in-depth interviews with locked out GPC workers and listening to the “stories” they tell about their experiences both pre- and post-lockout reveals positive and negative outcomes the event has had on their lives. These workers’ reflections include comments such as “leaving GPC was a blessing in disguise,” “there is somewhat of a silver-lining in leaving work at the plant,” and “being locked out was the best thing that ever could have happened to me and my family.” However, these workers’ stories are also laced with anger, bitterness, frustration,
resentment, betrayal, ambivalence, and contradictions regarding working for the company, the union’s role in the labor dispute, and workers’ current circumstances and future prospects. Essentially, workers reflections and comments demonstrate the complexity and contradictory effects of being displaced from work as a result of being locked out.

**American Deindustrialization and Industrial Restructuring**

The lockout at GPC demonstrates a number of fundamental structural changes that have been occurring within the U.S. economy over the last several decades and the social and economic implications of these changes. Faced with heightened international competition, the post-World War II United States economy has undergone remarkable industrial restructuring. Harrison and Bluestone explain in their classic work, *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America* (1988: viii):

For U.S.-based corporations, a quarter-century of unparalleled postwar growth gave way, by the late 1960s, to unprecedented global competition. As a consequence, profits were severely squeezed. Companies might have responded by going “back to basics”: improving product quality, investing in new technology, and fashioning more constructive relationships with their workers. Instead, they abandoned core businesses, invested offshore, shifted capital into overtly speculative ventures, subcontracted work to low-wage contractors here and abroad, demanded wage concessions from their employees, and substituted part-time and other forms of contingent labor for full-time workers – all in the name of “restructuring.”

In short, Bluestone and Harrison (1982, 1988) argue that competition in the global economy has resulted in the “deindustrialization of America.” They define the process of “deindustrialization” as the “widespread, systemic disinvestment in the nation’s basic productive capacity” (Bluestone and Harrison 1982:6). This definition and some of the basic assumptions associated with late 20th century American deindustrialization are contested in the industrial restructuring literature. For example, in *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*, Heathcott and Cowie (2003:2) point out: “Deindustrialization is not a story of a single emblematic place, such as Flint or Youngstown, or a specific time period, such as the 1980s: it is a much broader, more fundamental,
historical transformation.” They stress: “What was labeled deindustrialization in the intense political heat of the late 1970s and early 1980s turned out to be a more socially complicated, historically deep, geographically diverse and politically perplexing phenomenon than previously thought” (Heathcott and Cowie, 2003:2). Moreover, they and others (Cohen and Zysman, 1987; Russo and Linkon, 2009; McCormack, 2009) suggest that the reports of the demise of U.S. manufacturing industries have been greatly exaggerated. Heathcott and Cowie emphasize: “the numbers of jobs created and destroyed in the postwar era are very large, but the gross numbers of industrial employment are fairly stable. Quantitatively, manufacturing employment remained relatively constant – around 18 million jobs in 1965 and about 18.5 million in 2000” (2003: 14). Additionally, Russo and Linkon contend that amidst all of the rhetoric regarding America’s post-industrial economy: “manufacturing continues to play a key role, employing 9 percent of all U.S. workers (12.3 million) and 9 percent of all scientists and engineers. Manufacturing produces 12 percent of the total gross domestic product and is responsible for 60 percent of the nation’s research and development” (2009:186). In line with these arguments, Cohen and Zysman suggest that “we are experiencing a transition not from an industrial economy to a service economy, but from one kind of industrial economy to another” (1987:46).

While manufacturing continues to play a key role in the U.S. economy, the nature of manufacturing employment has undergone significant qualitative changes. One of the most profound changes within manufacturing industries in the United States has been the incessant drive by corporations to increase their “flexibility.” As Winson and Leach (2002:25) explain so elegantly, they are worth quoting at length:

It is the desire to increase flexibility in dealing with labor that is paramount in corporate strategies to deal with new competitive pressures and achieve the unprecedented levels of profitability demanded by major institutional investors. Increased flexibility has become a euphemism for cutting their wage bill. These corporate strategies include: (1) unremitting pressure for concessions from unionized and non-unionized workers in order to reduce their wages and overall compensation
packages; (2) the introduction of a two-tiered wage structure into the workplace whereby newly hired workers are paid much less than previously hired workers doing what is basically the same job, and this lower wage rate continues for much longer periods than has previously been the case; (3) the promotion of part-time contingent work schedules which include the introduction of a growing cadre of part-time or temporary workers within the firm itself, and/or the growth of subcontracting, where workers are supplied by another, typically non-union lower wage employers; (4) promoting the strategy of ‘union avoidance’ whereby firms increasingly ‘out-source’ production to non-unionized firms and/or individuals at home or abroad, while downsizing or shutting down unionized plants.

In the years leading up to the 2008 lockout, GPC engaged in a number of these corporate strategies aimed at achieving “flexibility.” The lockout itself may represent an additional corporate strategy utilized by the company to gain even greater flexibility. In other words, rather than being directly illustrative of American deindustrialization, the lockout at GPC represents an aggressive industrial restructuring strategy on the part of the corporation to create greater flexibility within its national-based production facilities. Although GPC is a worldwide marketer of corn-based products, since the company’s foundation in 1943, its headquarters and its primary production facilities have been based in Muscatine, Iowa. In 1998, a decade preceding the lockout, GPC built a second production facility in Washington, Indiana. Iowa and Indiana are both “right-to-work” states, but unionization and wage rates in Indiana are well-below that of Iowa. Moreover, the GPC facility in Indiana opened and has remained a non-union facility. Based on the accounts of locked out GPC workers, the average production worker’s wages at the Indiana facility are conservatively estimated at two-thirds that of their Muscatine facility counterparts pre-lockout. It is easy to see how this second facility could be used as company leverage in a labor dispute; for example, allowing the company to shift production and employees from one facility to the other. Whether GPC built its second facility with the intention of provoking a labor dispute and ultimately de-unionizing the Muscatine facility remains to be determined. However, early indications, based primarily on locked out workers’ accounts, suggests that the company may have manufactured the labor dispute, or at least failed to
“bargain in good faith,” in an effort to pressure the workers into concessionary collective bargaining or, as a number of locked out workers claim, “to rid the company of the union altogether.”

A number of the aforementioned corporate strategies utilized to increase flexibility described by Winson and Leach (2002), such as pressuring workers and their unions for concessions and reduced wages and benefits, incorporating a tiered wage structure and part-time and/or temporary workers into the workplace, as well as subcontracting and outsourcing, were all points of contention in the GPC/UFCW contract negotiations dating back to at least 1998. According to workers’ accounts, the company began subcontracting and outsourcing jobs at the plant in the late 1990s, beginning with the security personnel. Workers also indicated that they agreed to a number of concessions during the 1998 and 2003 contact negotiations; one of which was allowing the company to introduce a two-tiered wage structure. Workers also claimed that they were willing to compromise on a number of company’s demands during the 2008 contract negotiations, but held firm on the issue of outsourcing their jobs. As demonstrated by UFCW 86D President Tony Newton claims five years into the lockout, “The union has agreed to everything except the outsourcing clause” (Ferguson, 2013). Regardless of the company’s intentions leading up to and throughout the course of this prolonged and on-going lockout, the outcome to-date is that the company has been able to “replace” relatively well-paid, unionized workers with cheaper, non-union, contingent workers. In other words, GPC has achieved greater “flexibility” as a direct result of the lockout.²

An additional and related problem confronting contemporary American manufacturing workers as they faced industrial restructuring is the steady and continuous decline in unionization and union bargaining power over the last several decades. The decline in union density and collective bargaining coverage for American workers, especially in the private sector has been well-documented (Devinatz, 2013:393). As of 2012, just 6.6 percent of the U.S. private sector was covered by collective bargaining agreements (Devinatz, 2013:393). It appears that U.S. corporations
are taking advantage of this decline in union bargaining power and the staggering U.S. economy, and more recently the Great Recession, to go on the offensive by locking out workers in an effort to pressure them into wage and/or benefit concessions or to switch to nonunion workforces. As Gary Chaison, Professor of Industrial Relations at Clark University explains: “Lockouts, which were once fairly rare, are the epitome of employer attempts to control bargaining and be on the offensive…I see this as a continuation of the trend toward increased employer militancy in collective bargaining” (Greenhouse, 2012). Chaison and others (LeRoy, 1996; Greenhouse, 2012) suggest that the lockout is a successful industrial restructuring strategy that has become increasingly popular with employers throughout the country, with at least 17 lockouts in 2011 alone. Robert Combs, a researcher for Bloomberg BNA, reports that the percentage of lockouts to work stoppages was greater in 2010 –11 (nearly 10 percent) than between 2000 – 2009 (5.5 percent) and 1990 – 1999 (4 percent) (Global Gazette, 2012). Moreover, Combs documents that the lockout rate since 2011 has continued to climb and employers in recent years are not just producing more lockouts, but longer ones as well (Global Gazette, 2012). This begs the question: Is the lockout at GPC, with its appearance of a permanent rather than temporary labor dispute, an aberration in contemporary labor relations, or a precursor of things to come?

**Lockout Literature**

While there has been an abundance of publicity surrounding high profile lockouts in professional sports in recent years, such as the 2011 National Football League’s 130-day lockout and the 161-day lockout by the National Basketball Association also in 2011, little literature and research exists documenting the less visible industries and workforces across America affected by contemporary lockouts (Greenhouse, 2012). There are some historical accounts in the literature focused on major and devastating labor lockouts in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such as the 1892 Homestead, Pennsylvania Steel Mill Lockout. And although lockouts have
occurred over the last several decades, there has not been much in the way of academic assessment of these labor disputes. An exception, however, is Timothy Minchin’s (2003) book, *Forging a Common Bond: Labor and Environmental Activism during the BASF Lockout*, which is based on a case study of a landmark labor dispute and unusual alliance between a small union, Local 4-620 of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers’ International Union (OCAW) and environmentalists in Ascension Parish, Louisiana, against the German-based BASF chemical company. Minchin provides a thorough account of what was at the time the longest lockout in U.S. history and what resulted in an international campaign and a remarkable victory for the union and its’ locked out workers (Leonard and Nauth, 1990). The trajectory of the GPC lockout and its’ assumed outcome are notably different from the OCAW/BASF lockout and may represent an increasingly more common and successful employer strategy to de-unionize its’ workforce.

**Assessing Worker Displacement**

Industrial restructuring strategies to increase corporate “flexibility” over the past several decades have resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of American manufacturing workers (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982; Moore, 1996: Koeber and Wright, 2001; Cowie and Heathcott, 2003; Farber 2005; McCormack, 2009; Russo and Linkon, 2009). Understanding the magnitude and significance of worker displacement is beset by a number of practical and methodological issues. To begin, there is considerable disagreement in the literature regarding how to conceptualize “worker displacement” and “displaced workers.” As Fallick (1996:5) explains, “Because of the lack of consensus on the definition of displaced workers, the estimated number of displaced workers varies tremendously.” Moreover, he suggests that “to date, the only good source of estimates of the total number of displaced workers in the United States is the *Displaced Worker Surveys* (DWS).” Farber (2005:13) echoes this assessment stating: “Perhaps the most comprehensive source of information on the incidence and costs of job loss in the United States is
the *Displaced Worker Survey* (DWS), administered every two years since 1984 as a supplement to the *Current Population Survey* (CPS).”

One of the problems researchers relying on the DWS encounter is that since it was first administered, the conceptual definition of “displaced workers” and the design of the survey have undergone changes. Hamermesh (1989:52) documents that the federal government first settled on “the admittedly arbitrary definition of displaced workers as those who lost jobs that they held for three or more years, owing to slack work, abolition of the job, or closing of the plant.” Farber (2005:16) claims “the design changes in the DSW…complicate the analysis of the consequences of job loss. Most importantly, the follow-up questions designed to gather information on the characteristics of the lost job and experience since job loss were asked only of job losers who reported one of the following three reasons for job loss: slack work, plant closings, or position/shift abolished.” He refers to these as the “big three” reasons and claims that by just exploring these three, the DSW is missing important aspects of worker displacement (Farber, 2005). Currently, the DWS defines displaced workers as “persons 20 years of age and older who lost or left jobs because their plant or company closed or moved, there was insufficient work for them to do, or their position or shift was abolished” (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). As these definitions illustrate, the standard definition of “displaced workers” used by the government and most researchers neglects workers that have been displaced as a result of labor disputes and, more specifically, those workers who have been displaced as a result of lockouts.³

Notwithstanding these measurement issues, quantitative studies do reveal the overall magnitude of worker displacement as well as a number of social and economic factors related to displacement including age, race/ethnicity, gender, education, skill, job-tenure, union membership, industry, region, unemployment, reemployment, and occupational prestige (Hamermesh, 1989; Fallack, 1996; Moore, 1996; Farber, 2005; Lippmann and Rosenthal, 2008; U.S. Bureau of Labor
Typical of quantitative and survey research, these studies tend to rely on large sample sizes and aggregate data to draw correlations between variables such as “displacement” and “age,” “gender,” “race,” “industry,” etc. They also tend to measure displacement and consider its outcomes in mostly economic terms, such as lost wages and benefits, unemployment, reemployment, etc. As Moore (1996:18) explains, “The goal of most studies is to measure the duration of unemployment spells and the magnitude of the earnings reductions associated with job loss.” While these economic outcomes are important in and of themselves they do not provide us with a very contextual and nuanced understanding of the displacement process and the complexity of its social, as well as economic, consequences. Qualitative research has helped fill some of this void by providing a more in-depth assessment of the social dimensions of the displacement process.

While there are a number of qualitative studies describing and analyzing worker displacement and its social, economic, and psychological costs and consequences, most of these studies focus on displacement as a result of deindustrialization and plant closures (Bluestone and Harrison, 1982; Vaidya, 1986; Rothstein, 1986; Milkman, 1997; Winson, 1997; Bamberger and Davidson, 1999; Cowie and Heathcott, 2003; Fine, 2003; Friedman, 2003; May and Morrison, 2003; Russo and Linkon, 2003; Gibson, 2012). There are some studies, however, that have examined workers displacement as the result of corporate restructuring (Milkman, 1997; Cowie, 2001; Koeber, 2002; Winson and Leach, 2002).

The majority of the qualitative research is based on case studies of displaced workers, which provides particular advantages over quantitative assessments of worker displacement. As Koeber (2002:221) points out: “First, the case study approach helps break down the larger research population of displaced workers into manageable units, enabling an account of the complex experiences of a specific group of displaced workers. Second, case study techniques provide the subjects with the opportunity to have a ‘voice’ and to tell their ‘story’.” Moreover, case studies also
lend themselves to understanding the complexity of the displacement process. Koeber (2002:220) advocates using “a process-centered approach” in analyzing the experience of worker displacement. He refers to the *displacement process* as a complex series of events and experiences in which:

[Workers] are not only displaced from their jobs; they are displaced from distinct sets of ideas, experiences, conditions, and relations of or about work. This separation unfolds in a series of decisions, events and outcomes...becoming displaced consists of a multi-stage process of work and employment transformation that begins before job loss, as respondents work in firms undergoing significant organizational changes. The process continues after job loss, extending into the job search and into-reemployment, at which time [workers] encounter new work conditions and relations and form new ideas, expectations, and opinions about the meaning of work and of being a worker.

Qualitative researchers have documented a number of interrelated social, economic, and psychological consequences related to the displacement process. For instance, individuals and their families typically face severe economic challenges due to being displaced from work. Being displaced from a job means loss of wages and income, which usually creates financial difficulties. Jobs typically provide more than just wages to individuals and their families; they also frequently provide benefits such as health care coverage. Therefore, many displaced workers and their families lose access to health care as a direct result of the displacement process. Moreover, these financial difficulties can create stress, anxiety, depression, and family tensions, “which can manifest in a variety of ways, from increased use of drugs and alcohol to suicide and domestic violence” (Russo and Linkon, 2003:157).

A number of studies documented the relationship between being displaced from work and increased physical and psychological problems. For example, Russo and Linkon (2003:197) account: “Studies consistently report that physical health problems, such as headache, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease and digestive problems, as well as mortality rates, increase when people lose their jobs.” Moreover, they report, “displaced workers, especially primary breadwinners, are likely to feel significant pressure and anxiety about providing for their families” (Russo and Linkon, 2003:195). This pressure and anxiety is linked to strains on household and
marital relationships and an increased probability of domestic violence (Perrucci, Perrucci, and Trag, 1997).

The loss of a job not only undermines worker’s feelings of self-sufficiency, but also his or her self-identity. As Al Gini explains, “Work becomes our mark of identity, our signature on the world. To work is to be and not to work is not to be” (2000: IX). In his book My Job, My Self: Work and the Creation of the Modern Individual, Gini (2000) very succinctly demonstrates the ways in which work provides a strong sense of identity and self-worth, as well as a source of pride and a badge of honor (2000: XIII). Being displaced from work can disrupt an individual’s sense of self and his or her dignity, self-esteem, and self-confidence. May and Morrison (2003:262) argue that this is particularly true in small, rural communities in which a large, primary employer has been a focal point for employment and community networking. Muscatine, with a population of approximately 24,000, and a community in which GPC has been one of the chief employers for approximately three generations could be characterized as fitting such criteria.

Based on their case study of workers displaced from a manufacturing plant in Shelby, North Carolina, in 1998, May and Morrison (2003:273) also document the importance of workplace relationships: “…for workers in Shelby – as in many other communities – the distinctions between work and family, public and private, labor and leisure are blurred by social, affiliative networks that transcend these dichotomies.” In addition to May and Morrison (2003), several other case studies reveal how work plays a key role is shaping individuals’ social relations and networks (Milkman, 1997; Bamberger and Davidson, 1999; Hart and K’Meyer, 2003; 2003; Russo and Linkon, 2003). As Russo and Linkon (2003:195) detail:

Workplaces provide connections for most people that are built on shared experiences and daily interactions. Many workers describe their co-workers as being “like family.” For many, the workplace becomes a site for their most intimate relationships. When plants close, workers lose this easy day-to-day interaction. Feelings of shame, anger, and sadness may make it difficult for co-workers to maintain close ties once their shared work disappears. To lose such networks during a time of personal crisis is
doubly-hard. Displaced workers without good social support networks show higher rates of both physical and mental illness. For a significant number of individuals in a single community to lose a major support system at one time is devastating.

Overall, the majority of research on worker displacement focuses on deindustrialization and industrial restructuring and workers’ economic struggles following these processes, such as the loss of their jobs, their efforts at finding reemployment, and how their new employment measures up to the jobs they were displaced from in terms of stability, pay, benefits, working conditions, and unionization (Moore, 1996; Winson, 1997; Winson and Leach, 2002; Lippmann and Rosenthal, 2007). The overwhelming theme in this research is the negative outcomes associated with the displacement process on individual workers, their families, and their communities. Ruth Milkman’s (1997) benchmark study *Farewell to the Factory: Auto Workers in the Late Twentieth Century* stands out as the exception.

Milkman’s case study investigates the impact of economic restructuring in the auto industry on the lives of some 4000 workers employed at General Motors (GM) in Linden, New Jersey. In the mid-1980s, faced with increased international competition, GM underwent industrial restructuring which resulted in the elimination of approximately 1000 jobs at its Linden plant. “GM negotiated with the United Auto Workers union (UAW) to establish a buyout program offering cash payment to production workers who agreed to give up their jobs” (Milkman, 1997:1). Milkman tracked the trajectories of workers who accepted the buyout, as well as those who stayed at the plant, and found that four years after the buyout, the vast majority of workers who took it were glad they did. In fact, her findings reveal that the overwhelming majority of the workers that took the buyout were pleased to be rid of auto work and did not regret their decision to leave GM. Milkman also found that a minority of those workers who took the buyout, most of whom were self-employed, were actually better off financially after leaving work at the GM plant. And, even among the majority who earned less after leaving GM, most were happier at their new jobs. Milkman cautions that the results of her
case study may not be typical of displaced industrial workers given that the GM workers she followed left their jobs “voluntarily” through a negotiated buyout. She explains:

It would be wrong to conclude that deindustrialization is not as socially devastating as many other have argued, or is perhaps even a positive thing. Rather the lessons of these workers’ experiences is that under certain conditions, the transition away from industrial employment can be relatively painless, and for some, perhaps even beneficial (Milkman, 1997:136).

Milkman also advises against being nostalgic about the bygone era of industrialization and industrial work. She states, “…factory work in the golden age of mass production was deeply problematic in its own right. However much it fascinated some left-wing intellectuals, workers themselves never romanticized the assembly line – instead they mostly yearned to escape its relentless and dehumanizing rhythms (Milkman, 1997:12). Although the circumstances among locked out GPC workers differs in a number of ways from Milkman’s case study, most notably the fact that they were locked out rather than having the option of taking a buyout, data based on conversations with locked out GPC workers suggests that there are some interesting parallels between her case study and their experiences. For instance, several of the workers I have interviewed have become self-employed as result of being lockout and report being better off financially post-lockout than they were working for GPC. Remarkably, over half of the workers I have interviewed report being better off financially than they were pre-lockout. Many of these workers report that the transition away from work at GPC and into self-employment and/or reemployment was easier than they anticipated it would be and in many ways beneficial.4

In addition to Milkman’s work, another exception in the worker displacement literature is Joy Hart and Tracy K’Meyer’s (2003) case study of a Johnson Controls battery plant closing in Louisville, Kentucky in 1995. Hart and K’Meyer’s oral history interviews with displaced workers revealed “that the closing had had a positive impact on their lives” 2003:295). Hart and K’Meyer (2003:295) explain, “While acknowledging that the loss was a financial blow, several simply saw it,
for one reason or another, as a ‘blessing in disguise’. Hart and K’Meyer (2003:295) suggest that, “In part, this was a result of their [the displaced workers] own determination to ‘look at the positive things that could happen out of this’.” Overall, these authors found that workers were satisfied with their positions post-plant closure. Here too, interviewers with locked out GPC workers reveal similar findings regarding the positive outcomes of being displaced for work as a result of the lockout.

With the exception of these two aforementioned case studies, what seems to be largely missing from the industrial restructuring and worker displacement literature is an account of worker agency and resilience in the face of these life-altering processes. Moreover, the existing literature underemphasizes workers’ social relations and networks within their communities and the role these relationships play in recovering from displacement. Also largely missing from the research on worker displacement is an analysis of those workers who are displaced as a result of labor disputes and, more specifically, lockouts. As previously indicated, the definition of “displaced workers” utilized by the U.S. government and the DWS, as well as most other research, neglects those workers displaced by lockouts. In short, there seems to be a need to expand the definition and understanding of “displaced workers.” There are just a few qualitative studies in recent years that explore the effects of lockouts on workers, their families, and their communities. Although informative, most of these studies are based outside of the United States. For instance, Vaidya’s (1986) case study of effects of prolonged lockouts on working class families in India and Lavalette and Kenny’s (1996) case study of the social effects of locked out workers on the Liverpool docks.

This study of the GPC lockout aims to fill some of these voids. Furthermore, this study is aimed at facilitating a better understanding of the processes of worker displacement, agency, and resilience in the face of industrial restructuring. A systematic assessment of this particular prolonged and on-going lockout will also hopefully provide insight into the future of collective
bargaining and may help to inform broader union strategies in the face of increasingly aggressive employer efforts to force union concessions and/or de-unionize their workforce.

**Methods**

This qualitative case study of the conditions leading up to and following the GPC lockout aims at capturing the structural factors at play locally and within the broader economy, while also emphasizing the workers’ qualitative objective and subjective experiences of being locked out and of the displacement process. Data are comprised of in-depth interviews with locked out workers. Initial contacts with these workers have been made through personal acquaintances (Muscatine is my hometown and therefore I have friends and family members among the locked out workers). Referral or what is commonly referred to as “snowball” sampling was utilized to reach additional workers.

While several studies have documented the effects of worker displacement, Koeber (2002:221) explains that they seldom reveal the sequence of events and surrounding circumstances that unfold in the process of being displaced from work and finding alternative employment and financial security. A case study approach to the GPC lockout and interviews with locked out workers fills some of this void. Moreover, this study considers how workers navigated the experience of being locked out and ultimately being displaced from their jobs. These qualitative interviews provide a more worker-centered account of the lockout and offer workers the opportunity to have “voice” and to tell their “story.” Scholars have emphasized the utility of a narrative approach to understanding experiences such as being displaced from work (Hart and K’Meyer, 2003 and May and Morrison, 2003). For example, May and Morrison (2003:268) explain “we construct stories to reflect on the past, to comprehend the present, and to anticipate the future. [These] stories weave the intricate and sometimes contradictory experiences of our lives.” It is important to provide locked out GPC workers the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and
offer their perspectives regarding the lockout and its aftermath. Workers’ narrative descriptions and first-hand accounts of their “lived experiences” working for the company, being involved in the union, being locked out of work, and finding subsequent financial stability can provide a nuanced understanding of contemporary labor relations and the effects of industrial restructuring, worker displacement, and working-class agency.

Some questions that have been explored and will continue to be explored in interviews with the locked out workers include: (1) How and why did they started working at GPC?; (2) What was their tenure with the company prior to the lockout?; (3) How long did they intend on working for GPC?; (4) How do they feel about the lockout?; (5) Who do they feel is responsible and how would they have liked the labor dispute to be handled?; (6) What consequences have they faced as a result of being lockout and displaced?; (7) Would they go back to work at GPC, if given the opportunity?; (8) How do their lives compare now to when they were working at GPC?; and (9) How do they see their future?

Although preliminary, workers responses to these and additional questions suggest a typology that outlines different trajectories of workers’ experiences both pre- and post-lockout. Interviews with locked out workers have begun to provide a comprehensive account of the complex and sometime contradictory experiences they encountered as a consequence of being displaced from their jobs and finding alternative financial security. To date, I have interviewed 52 of the 360 locked out GPC workers. I began conducted these interviews in December of 2013 and am still in the process of conducting them. Most of the interviews have taken place in workers’ homes in Muscatine and its surrounding rural communities. The average length of the interviews has been between two and three hours.

The majority of interviewees (N= 46) are white men ranging in age from 30 to 64, with their years of employment at GPC ranging from 4 to 41. According to workers’ estimates the
overwhelming majority, approximately 95 percent, of the locked out workers are white males. According to workers’ accounts there were less than a handful of racial or ethnic minorities working for the company before the lockout. Workers also claim that less than two dozen of the locked out workers are women. Interviews explained that most women worked in the “lab” which employed an estimated 16 to 18 individuals. They also claimed that there were just four women working “out in the plant” (i.e., production workers). In what follows I present themes that emerged in these interviews.

*Initial Findings*

The majority of locked out GPC workers indicated that they are from Muscatine and its surrounding rural communities. Nearly all interviewees graduated from Muscatine High School or neighboring Louisa-Muscatine and Wilton High Schools. Most explained that they went to work at GPC straight out of high school rather than pursuing higher education or any sort of formal training. For nearly all of these individuals, working at GPC represented a shift from part-time employment to their first full-time job. Over half of the workers I interviewed explained that they “got on at the plant” because they had family members (i.e., mostly fathers) working at GPC that helped them secure employment. It was routine for GPC workers to help get their children and other relatives jobs at the plant. The following remarks were typical of locked out workers who pointed to family ties as influential in their decision to seek employment at GPC: “My father worked down there and told me they were hiring summer help. Well, my summer job ended up lasting 27 years.” And, “My wife’s parents both worked at GPC, so right out of high school they were pressuring me to get a job there.” Moreover, a locked out worker who counted five family members working at GPC before the lockout stated, “Well, I was never told to go to the plant and apply, I guess I just assumed that was what I supposed to do, what was expected of me.” Familial relationship at GPC seemed to
influence not only the initial hiring of workers but also job assignments and advancements in the internal labor market at the plant.

Those workers who were unable to draw on family connections to get hired at GPC indicated that their decisions to seek employment with the company were based on its reputation in the community and surrounding rural areas for being a “good place to work.” In the words of several of the locked out workers, “it was the best place in town to work.” Nearly all of the workers indicated that at the time they were hired at GPC the pay and benefits offered by the company were superb relative to other manufacturing companies in the community. As a worker with 32 years at GPC explained, “There were other places to work, like Power and Water, Bandage, and HON, but none of them paid as much as GPC. It was the best money in town.”

Lured by family members, the company’s reputation, high pay and good benefits, workers indicated that they quickly became accustomed to their high salaries which made it difficult to even contemplate leaving work at GPC. Furthermore, as they married and had children they became more dependent on the high wages and fringe benefits that the company offered its employees and their families. Workers explained that as their tenure at the plant increased, they became committed to staying until they could retire with a decent pension. In fact, almost all of the workers I interviewed had either planned on retiring from GPC before they were locked out or ended up retiring after they were locked out. However, a few of the younger interviewees, with less years at GPC, indicated that they were not sure whether they would retire at GPC and commented on hoping they wouldn’t be there until retirement.

Being lockout of their jobs on August 22, 2008, caught nearly all of the interviewees completely off guard. Not a single interviewee anticipated this labor dispute would eventually result in their displacement from GPC. Over the years they had worked for the company, they reported relative decent and stable labor relations at the plant. In the time they had worked for the company it
had always been union and there had not been any major labor disputes. A couple workers mentioned a brief wildcat strike at the plant in the 1960s, but that was “before their time.” A few interviewees also mentioned “talk of a strike” and “the company threatening to lock us out” during the 2003 contact negotiations, but those grumblings never really amounted to much. Workers claimed that typically both the company and the union bargained in good faith and came to an agreement on a new contract relatively quickly at the expiration of the previous one. As one worker with nearly 30 years of experience at GPC explained:

A couple members from management and a couple of members from the union board would get together in the weeks before the contract was set to expire. The [Union] Board would bring the company’s contract proposal to us, the union members, to discuss and vote on. We’d ask for a few changes and they’d go back and forth a couple of times until both sides compromised and everyone was happy. And we’d have a new contract and be solid for several years.

The majority of interviewees verified this process of reaching bargaining agreements. Moreover, most indicated that they were relatively hands-off in the process, leaving the bargaining up to the Union Board. The following were typical descriptions these workers gave regarding their participation, or lack thereof, in contract negotiations: “I don’t really get involved with what the union is doing expect when it comes time to vote on a new contract;” and “I usually start attending the monthly union meetings when the contact is set to expire.” Several of the interviewees were not members of the union and therefore did not participate in union meetings or contract negotiation, and were not eligible to vote on contract offers. Furthermore, they claimed that they were not privy to what was being negotiated and disputed between the company and the union.

Although workers did not anticipate the lockout, interviewees mentioned changes occurring at GPC in the years leading up to the lockout. These changes require a brief history of the company’s ownership and management. GPC was established in Muscatine in 1943 by two local businessmen, Gage A. Kent and Simon G. Stein. Over the years, ownership and management of the plant has been handed down from one generation to the next. However, in the year preceding the
lockout, after three generations of joint ownership by the Kent and Stein/Kautz families, the Kautz family sold their ownership to the Kent family and Terry Kautz, grandson of Simon G. Stein, retired from the company. Several workers claim that these events facilitated an effort on the part of Gage A. Kent, the founder’s grandson and GPC’s Chief Executive Officer, to “get rid of the union.” As a locked out worker with over three decades experience with GPC described:

Well, hindsight is 20/20. Things started to change when the second generation passed the company down to the third generation. What’s that “third generation theory”? The first generation builds the company from the ground up. The second generation makes the company profitable. And the third generation runs the company into the ground. Well, things really started changing with the third generation. It started with little things like taking away the company boat, and then it was the Christmas parties, and then it was the summer picnics, and then the company was asking us for give-backs so they could build another plant in Indiana. We gave back a lot in the 2003 contract, mostly because we were told by the company they would make it up to us in 2008. Looking back…I guess the writing was on the wall. Maybe we didn’t want to see it?

Although most workers did not notice many changes in management-employee relations in the weeks and days leading up to the lockout, a significant number indicated gradual changes in labor relations beginning with the 2003 contact negotiations. Reflecting back, they suggested that attitudes and morale within the plant began to change noticeably after the 2003 collective bargaining agreement between the company and the union was reached.

**Blaming the Company and Management**

Not surprisingly, the locked out workers do not hesitate in blaming GPC ownership and management for the lockout. After all, they were locked out. They didn’t choose to leave their jobs and/or be escorted out of the plant on Friday, August 22, 2008. When asked who is responsible for the lockout, they are quick to name Gage Kent and suggest their displacement is a result of his greed and arrogance. All but two of the 52 interviewed workers mentioned his name and greed as cause of the lockout, as the following few comments reveal:
It is all about Gage and his arrogance. The workers and their families are meaningless to him. For him, it is all about the money and you can make more money paying your workers just $13/hr. and not providing them with any insurance than you can paying us union workers.

Sad…It’s just sad that all that man cares about is money. His father and his grandfather appreciated their workers. They walked through and spent time the plant. They understood the importance of having hard-working and loyal workers. They showed appreciation for their workers and their workers were proud to say they worked for GPC.

He doesn’t give a shit about us workers, our families, or this community. The conditions in the plant are nasty and look at how he is polluting this community. He cares about one thing and one thing only: profits. If it is going to make him more profitable then by all means, do it! Get rid of the union, get rid of workers with two and three decades of service, and get me more profit!

Workers expressed a number of feelings regarding the company’s role in the lockout; such as anger, frustration, bitterness, betrayal, disappointment, and resentment. Workers expressed their anger at the company and management for what they perceived as putting profits before long-term, devoted, and loyal employees. Several workers explained that in the months leading up to the lockout they were hearing comments from management regarding how productive and profitable the company had been in recent times, which indicated to these workers that they would be rewarded for their hard work and productivity in the new contract. Or, at the very least, the company would not be asking them and their union for concessions during contract negotiations. As one worker explained, “I wouldn’t be so pissed off if he [Gage Kent] and his cronies wouldn’t have been bragging about how much money we made them; and, for what? To be thrown out of the plant and out of our jobs?”

Workers also expressed frustration with what they felt was the company’s unwillingness to offer and/or negotiate a fair contract in 2008. A common theme among interviewees is that the company purposely handed the union something they would not and could not accept in an attempt to provoke a labor dispute. The following interviewee’s comments capture the sentiment among many of the locked out workers I interviewed:
The company proposed a contract they knew we wouldn’t accept. They began with their “best and final offer.” How is that negotiating? They wanted to force us out. There was no way we [union members or the union’s executive board] were going to accept what they were offering and they knew it. They wanted us to vote it down and probably even wanted us to go on strike. They never planned on negotiating anything. To get rid of the union was their plan from the get-go.

The overwhelming majority of workers interviewed suggested that within the first few weeks of the lockout it became clear to them that the company was not interested in negotiating a new contract with the union. Another locked out worker’s remarks reiterate the aforementioned sentiment among many of the interviewees:

He wanted rid of us and the union all along. He wasn’t even attempting to negotiate with us and the board members. When the company met with the board [UFCW Local 86D Executive Board] it was all superficial…The company did whatever they had to do to appear as if they were negotiating in “good faith” and avoid unfair labor practice charges. It was a joke. The company just kept changing the wording of their original contact offer. Hell, the governor even tried to get them to negotiate and they told him to “stick it.”

Similarly, a locked out worker with over 24 years working for GPC before the lockout stated:

The company handed us a contract it knew we couldn’t and wouldn’t accept. Gage wanted us out. And if we would have accepted it [the company’s proposed contract] we would have been out anyway. See, the contract was the company’s “last, best, and final offer” and it had a clause in it which gave the company the right to get rid of whoever it wanted…to hire replacements and to subcontract or outsource our jobs. There would be no job security if we accepted the contract they handed us. One way or another, Gage was going to get rid of us.

Perhaps the greatest frustration for the lockout workers was the lack of respect afforded to them and their years of service to the company. This frustration was mixed with a sense of disappointment and betrayal. A common theme in talking with workers is that they feel as though GPC has breached an implicit “social contract” between them and the company, in which if they were loyal to the company and worked hard, they would be rewarded by the company in terms of good wages and benefits, raises and promotions, job security, and a decent retirement. As the following workers’ comments reveal:
• Initially, I felt so betrayed by the company. I gave the company over 30 years of hard work. I worked swing shift for over half those years. Swing shift means you have no life, no family life, and no social life. I trusted all those years of hard work and loyalty meant something. I depended on the company and they betrayed me.

• Gage’s father and grandfather never would have betrayed their workers like this. I am disappointed, but what can you do? You just move on and put it behind you. What else can you do? It’s hard though. I mean 32 years. Thirty-two years for what?

• I guess I am bitter. Bitter that I worked most of my life there, over three decades, and they could just put me out on the streets like they did. Who does that to their loyal workers? Where’s the company’s loyalty?

A number of workers mentioned resenting the fact that they worked as hard as they did for the company, in light of being locked out. They commented on resenting the fact that they: “took their job so seriously,” “never slacked off on the job,” “went to work sick rather than calling in,” “missed holidays with their families,” “worked so much overtime,” and “never took vacation days.” A common theme among most interviewees is regretting working swing shift and the toll it took on their bodies and relationships. Nearly every worker I interviewed worked swing shift at some point, with the average number of years of swing shift among these workers being 22 years. Yet, a few workers indicted working swing shift for over thirty years. These workers all mentioned missing out on time and activities with their families, especially their children, as a result of working swing shift. At least half a dozen of the interviewees even claimed that working swing shift was the reason they were divorced. Several workers also mentioned health problems, such as sleep apnea, related to working swing shift. The conditions and effects mentioned by these workers are consistent with the vast research on the how swing shift work “negatively affects worker’s health, well-being, life satisfaction, and happiness” (Boivin, Temblay, and James, 2007).

Abandoned by the Union

In addition to blaming the company for the lockout, the majority of interviewees expressed dissatisfaction and disappointment with regard to the union. Most of this disappointment and
frustration was aimed at the international UFCW’s role, or lack thereof, in the labor dispute. Workers claimed: “what was happening in Muscatine was off the International’s radar,” “we are only a few hundred workers…the International is more concerned with Wal-Mart workers,” “they came down here and got us all rallied-up and then were nowhere to be found,” and “they hung us out to dry.” A quick search of the International’s website lends some validity to these workers’ claims. In the nearly six years since the lockout began, less than a handful of press releases and/or articles have been posted on the website. In addition to being disappointed, workers expressed feeling irrelevant, insignificant, and mostly abandoned by the International UFCW. Generally, these workers expressed that the International could have and should have done more to help Local 86D and their members in the labor dispute.

Interviewees also expressed discontent with the leadership of UFCW Local 86D. The most common complaint was a lack of communication between the leadership and rank-and-file members. Another shared perception among these workers, was that the Local leadership didn’t anticipate the lockout and was ill-prepared to take on the company in a labor dispute. As one worker explained, “They [Local 86D Leaders] didn’t anticipate the company would lock us out, and they surely didn’t prepare us for a being locked out.” About half of the interviewees also suggested that the Local leadership had its own agenda in this labor dispute. They claimed that the Local president at the time of the lockout was close to retirement and therefore “wouldn’t be affected by,” and “wasn’t too concerned about,” the outcome. In the words of one of these locked workers: “He did not have a log in the fire. He was planning on retiring.” There has been significant turnover in Local 86D’s leadership since 2008, with the majority of the original Union Board members retiring from GPC. Less than a handful of the workers I interviewed knew who the current Local 86D President is, even though nearly one-third of these workers are still technically “locked out GPC workers” and union members (i.e., they have not retired or terminated their employment with the company).
UFCW Local 86D no longer has its office located across the street from the GPC plant. The Local’s website has been disabled. In addition, the telephone number listed on the International’s website for Local 86D has been disconnected. Locked out workers are no longer gathering and picketing outside of the plant. Although Local 86D was still holding monthly meetings, these meetings are usually only attended by a handful of workers. Only one of the 52 interviewees mentioned still attending the union meetings and the overwhelming majority of interviewees weren’t even aware that these meetings were still taking place.8

**Workers’ Expectations of Lockout’s Outcome**

None of the interviewees anticipated being locked out of work and ultimately being displaced from his or her job at GPC. As earlier explained, the overwhelming majority of these workers expected to work for the company until retirement. Even the few interviewees that were in their early-thirties at the onset of the lockout planned on retiring with the company. Not one of these workers expected that nearly six years later the labor dispute would still be unsettled. Their comments and questions reveal their puzzlement with regard to fact that it is still on-going:

- When will it end? How will it end? Will it ever end? It can’t go on forever, can it?
- The company has no interest in ending it, so it’s never going to end.
- The entire thing is a little bizarre to me. The union told us that GPC couldn’t hire permanent workers to replace us, but they did. GPC doesn’t want us back, so I guess it’s over and GPC won.
- Can we be locked out if there is no longer a union? The [International] union told us they can’t afford us anymore. They said that they support us, but they can no longer support us financially. I’m not even sure if there is a local union anymore. The office is gone and there isn’t a phone number to call.
- The International came to town and told us to accept the contract and go back to work, but we can’t go back to work if the company doesn’t want us back.

Although these workers are unclear what to make of the fact that the labor dispute remains unsettled, they are certain that regardless of the outcome of the lockout, they are not going back to
work at GPC. Just three of the 52 interviewees indicated that they would even consider going back to work for GPC if given the opportunity, and whether they decided to go back or not would depend largely on what type of conditions they would be returning to. A few of interviewees indicted that they were “waiting it out to retire” and “counting the days until they could retire with their full benefits.” As an interviewee who was close to retirement explained, “if I had to go back to put in my six months until I can retire, I would.” For the most part, the interviewees who had not yet retired or terminated their employment at GPC were adamant about being done with the company.

When asked about their initial reaction to hearing that they had been locked out, most interviewees responded that they were in shock and disbelief. They really had a hard time believing that the company would lock them out after their years of hard work and devotion. A number of the workers admitted that they were not even sure what “a lockout was” or “what it meant to be locked out.” They claimed they knew it was different than being on strike, but were unsure what exactly it entailed. Most interviewees assumed GPC and the union would continue contract negotiations and quickly settle on a new collective bargaining agreement. Or, at the very least, GPC would allow them to go back to work under the old contract until the two sides could agree on a new one. A common theme among interviewees was that they thought they would be back to work in less than a couple of weeks, once locked out. The following comment was typical of these interviewees, “I thought we’d be out a week or maybe two, but two weeks at the most.”

By two months into the lockout (i.e., the end of October 2008) over half of the workers I interviewed claimed they knew they were not ever going back to work at GPC. They explained that early into the lockout they realized that the company was able to keep up with production without them and did not want them back in the plant. Several workers claimed that once they got locked out “the writing was on the wall” that GPC provoked the lockout to get rid of them and the union. Just under half of the 52 interviewees said that it took them about a year to come to the realization
that they were not going back to work at GPC. And just a handful of the interviewees indicated that they held out hope of going back to work at GPC for about two years before deciding they needed to “move on” and “come up with a new plan.”

**Maintaining and Reestablishing Financial Viability**

Obviously, being locked out and ultimately displaced from work results in a loss of income and a source of financial stability and security. So how were the locked out GPC workers and their families able to maintain their standard of living and remain financial viability? The simple answer is that not all of them were able to. However, most interviewees did manage to remain financially viable, and perhaps more surprisingly, nearly six years after being locked out, a number of them are better off (financially and otherwise) than they were pre-lockout. Again, this is not to suggest that workers and their families did not face hardships as a result of the lockout, rather it is to call attention to the remarkable perseverance and resilience demonstrated by these workers and their families in the face of such hardships. Three of the interviewees lost their homes and four were forced to declare bankruptcy. Half a dozen of the interviewees mentioned depleting their savings after being locked out and a number of others explained that they had to withdraw their 401Ks in order to remain financially viable. About ten percent of the interviewees indicated that they incurred debt by taking out personal loans, student loans, and using their credit cards. However, there seem to be a number of factors that played a part in reducing the amount of financial hardships most interviewees faced and aiding them in remaining financially viable after being locked out. One such factor is the role of the state, more specifically, unemployment benefits provided by the state. Unlike in the case of a strike, locked out workers are eligible to receive unemployment benefits. All 52 interviewees utilized their unemployment benefits, and most claimed that these benefits were essential to maintaining their and their families’ financial viability. Moreover, as a consequence of the nation’s 2007 – 2009 “Great Recession,” these unemployment benefits were extended by
President Obama, which also assisted the workers’ financial situation. Interviewees explained that having this extension was paramount in “holding them over” financially until they were able to retire or find full-time re-employment. All of the interviewees utilized unemployment benefits to some degree; however, the amount and length of these benefits varied among the workers based on when they were able to retire from GPC and/or find reemployment.

Another factor that appears to have played a part in reducing the amount of financial hardships most interviewees faced after being locked out and facilitating in their financial viability is that the UFCW provided weekly funds for the these workers for a number of months. All of the interviewees reported receiving financial support from the UFCW. More specifically, they claimed that they had received $100/week for “picket pay” during the first couple of years of the lockout. A member of the UFCW executive board explained this “picket pay” as follows:

The locked out workers that came down to the union office outside the plant and picketed with the union received $100 a week. When workers retired or found other jobs, they stopped coming down and getting the funds. However, some workers depended on these funds for several years. Eventually, the funds dried up and the UFCW [International] cut us off.

Similar to unemployment benefits, the amount of union funds received among the interviewees varied based on when they found reemployment and/or retired from GPC. Most of the interviewees estimated that they received $100/week from the UFCW for one to two years. The union also set up a “hardship fund” to help workers in need of additional support. As explained by one of the interviewees:

Besides the picket pay, the union had additional money in hardship funds that members could apply for in the case of an emergency...like if they couldn’t make their utilizes payment or things like that. I think the International gave us some money for the hardship funds, but it also came from donations from other union plants around the region. See, some union members traveled to other UFCW and asked for donations to help us out.

It is worth noting that over the course of the lockout a significant number of workers were able to retire from GPC, which may help explain the relatively smooth financial transition from
earning an income to being locked out to receiving a pension. Over one-third of interviewees indicated that they were able to retire during the course of the lockout. Based in interviewees’ estimates between one-third to one-half of the 360 locked out workers have retired since the lockout began in August of 2008. Some interviewees explained that they ended up retiring earlier than they had anticipated as a result of the lockout. About half of these workers claimed that they were pleased they were “forced to retire earlier than they had planned.” As the following descriptions reveal:

- Well hell, they did me a favor by locking me out. No more swing shift, no more working nights, no more working overtime… Hell, for the first time in almost four decades I am able to sleep-in.

- My wife got transferred out-of-state for work and I was able to go with her. If I was still working at GPC, I wouldn’t have been able to go with her.

- I ought to thank Gage Kent. He did me a favor by locking me out. I am able to enjoy my retirement. If I would’ve stayed in there [the GPC plant] until I was planning on retiring who knows what kind of shape my body would be in. I wouldn’t be able to enjoy anything.

Several of the retired interviewees estimated that they took somewhat of a financial hit by retiring before they had initially planned. Yet, most of them have found part-time employment in the local and surrounding communities to supplement their retirement income and maintain their standard of living. They all reported a reduction in pay at their new jobs; however, a number of them claim to enjoy their new jobs, which include maintenance work, carpentry, construction, and farming. There are a couple of workers that are struggling to get by on their retirement pay and part-time work.

Another factor contributing to the interviewees’ financial sustainability during the lockout is the fact that a number of these workers reported having spouses that made substantial contributions to their household revenues. Although a number of them reported becoming accustomed to a relatively high standard of living, which their dual earning household provided before the lockout, they were able to cut back on their expenses after being locked out and managed on just one income
until the locked out spouse found re-employment. About twenty percent of the interviewees reported that their spouses made equal or more money than they did working at GPC before being locked out. A few of the interviewees mentioned that their spouses obtained second jobs during the lockout to contribute to the financial viability of their households. A common theme among the interviewees who had spouses working at the time of the lockout was the importance of being able to secure health insurance for themselves and their families through their spouses’ employers given the fact that they and their families lost their health care coverage at GPC the day they were locked out. Also worth noting, at least seven of interviewees reported spouses, ex-spouses, partners, or ex-partners that are currently working for GPC.

An additional consideration in explaining how workers were able to maintain and reestablish financial viability after being locked out is the fact that a number of these workers, while working for GPC, had additional employment “on the side.” Approximately one out of every five interviewees indicated they had additional employment while working for GPC. In most cases, these workers were self-employed. Once locked out, these workers were able to turn to their alternative and/or self-employment on a more full-time basis. One of these workers revealed that he is making four-fold the income he was making at GPC being self-employed. He claimed the lockout was a “blessing in disguise” because it pushed him to invest more time and money into his own business, which eventually “paid off and in a number of ways.” Moreover, he was able to employ and train a number of his fellow-locked out workers. I cannot go into much detail about these self-employed individuals without risking their anonymity. However, I believe the fact that a number of locked out GPC workers were managing both full-time manufacturing employment and additional employment is something that needs further exploration. For example, does it suggest a work ethic common among Midwestern workers? When questioned about the tendency of GPC workers to have “side-jobs,” interviewees suggested a number of factors that might contribute to this
phenomenon. For instance, they explained that some workers initially went to GPC to supplement their income from farming and stayed working for the company because of the good pay and benefits and job security. Eventually, farming became secondary to their employment at GPC. Interviewees also suggested that working swing shift “freed-up” the days and evenings for workers to take on additional jobs and projects.

Another factor worthy of consideration in explaining the economic viability of locked out GPC workers is their social networks in the community, including their family and friendship connections. These social networks and connections became apparent when interviewing locked out workers and asking them how they found reemployment, and in some cases rather quickly after being displaced from their long-term jobs at GPC. Interviewees described how they were able to utilize their family and friendship ties in Muscatine and the surrounding rural communities to find employment opportunities. In the early weeks of the lockout these connections were used to find mostly part-time and informal work. However, as the lockout dragged on, similar connections were utilized to secure more formal and full-time employment. As the following interviewees’ responses reveal:

- My dad was a carpenter, so I learned carpentry as I was growing up. I’ve always done a little bit of carpentry work on the side. The guys at work [GPC] know I like doing the work. So when they’d hear of someone who needed some work, they’d call me up, and I’d go to work.

- My brother-in-law is a general contractor and when he heard we were lockout, he gave me a call and a few of us [locked out workers] went to work roofing for him. It was hard work, but it was also cash.

- My family had a farm here [Wapello, were the population is approximately 2000]. There are a bunch of farmers around here. I know a bunch of them through my family and we always run into each other in town. When they found out what happened to us, they put a bunch of us to work… I retired [from GPC during the lockout], but I’m still farming.

- It’s a long story. The short of it is…I was at a softball tournament for my daughter and her couch asked me if I wanted a job."
All fifty-two of the interviewees, except for those who have retired, and some that have retired, are reemployed. With the exception of a few interviewees, the locked out workers I have interviewed have been able to secure reemployment or turn to self-employment within the local and surrounding communities. Just three of the 52 interviewees indicted that they had to relocate in order to secure reemployment and/or remain financially viable. Most of the interviewees mentioned relying on personal contacts for employment leads and recommendations. Several explained that it was typical that when one of the locked out workers would “get on” at one of the other major employers in town, such as Monsanto, Muscatine Power & Water, HNI, and MidAmerican Energy, they would “keep their eyes out” for additional job openings and notify their fellow-locked out workers. As one interviewee explained, “We have our eyes and ears open for each other…As soon as we hear some place in town is hiring, we get out our phones.” Although most of the existing research suggests that when displaced workers find reemployment, their new jobs tend to pay less and offer fewer benefits and less job security, this does not hold true for the majority of locked out workers I have interviewed. Surprisingly, the majority of the interviewees who have not retired since being locked out at GPC claim to be making more money now than they did pre-lockout. The following are a few examples of what these interviewees reported:

- When I got locked out, I was making about $24 an hour, and with overtime, I was making about 45 to 55 grand a year. Last year, I made 65 grand.

- I would say the most I ever made at GPC, with overtime, was about $50,000. Last year, I made $83,000.

- Let’s just say I am making way more working for myself.

- I’m on track this year to make almost double what I made at GPC.

- About $3 per hour more. That’s how much more I am making at my new job than I was at GPC.

This leads to a related, and perhaps counterintuitive, finding: interview data suggest that the longer the lockout has dragged on, the better off, financially and otherwise, the majority of the locked out
workers report being. All but a handful of interviewees reported that they and their families are “better off” or doing “about the same” today as they were pre-lockout. While some indicated that they have suffered somewhat of a financial setback, they report that their quality of life is better today and that they are recovering financially. Even the interviewee who described perhaps the most dire circumstances of all of the interviewees’ since being locked out, including the foreclosure of his home and a divorce, stated that he is better off today than he was before the lockout. He reasoned: “I was living a lie…My life was a lie. I wasn’t happy in my marriage. I wasn’t happy at my job. I wasn’t happen how and where I was living…I was on autopilot. Things needed to change and I wasn’t going to change them. The lockout forced me to change.” Also related to the duration of the lockout is an early indication among interviewees that those of them who assumed early on in the lockout that they would not be returning to work at GPC, and therefore started the processes of recovering from their displacement, were the ones that sustained the least amount of adversity as a result of the lockout.

**Early Theoretical Implications & Future Explorations**

Although this study is still ongoing, early indications suggest there are a number of factors and/or conditions that may facilitate workers’ “recovery” from being locked out of work and the displacement process. As I have described, there seem to be several factors that help explain the resilience of these locked out workers, and the surprisingly positive outcomes of being displaced from GPC for a significant proportion of them.

The factors that have been identified so far suggest the existence of a sort of “recovery capital.” Robert Granfield and William Cloud (1999) introduced the concept of *recovery capital* (RC) in their book, *Coming Clean: Overcoming Addiction without Treatment*. As denoted in the title of the book, the concept has been used in reference to recovering from alcohol and other addictions. Basically, they define RC as “the breadth and depth of internal and external resources...
that can be drawn upon to initiate and sustain recovery from alcohol and other drug problems” (Granfield and Cloud, 2008:22). An adaptation of this concept may be helpful in explaining the factors that contribute to workers’ “recovery” from being locked out and the displacement process. Some potential dimensions of such “recovery capital” would include: (1) workers’ family composition, support and connections; (2) workers’ social relations and networks in the community; (3) local, regional, and national labor market conditions; (4) public and private economic assistance programs; and (5) workers’ agency, initiative, and innovation.

There are still a number of areas and questions that need further exploration in this case study. However, early indications suggest that if we move past focusing exclusively on the negative consequences of worker displacement to gain a better understanding the displacement and recovery processes, we can begin to develop some useful strategies to prepare for, and responding to, contemporary industrial restructuring. And, more specifically, what seems to be an increasingly more common employer tactic to push down wages and increase profits: lockouts.

Notes:

1. Richard Leonard and Zack Nauth, as well as Neil Maher, document the German-based BASF chemical company’s lockout of Local 4-620 of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers’ International Union (OCAW) in Ascension Parish, Louisiana as representing the longest lockout in U.S. history. This lockout lasted approximately five and one half years, beginning in June 1984 and ending in December of 1989. The lockout at GPC recently surpassed this five and one half year mark.

2. Based on the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and decisions by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) an employer may hire permanent replacements for strikers, but may only hire temporary replacements during a lockout (LeRoy, 1996:999). According to lockout out workers’ accounts, GPC and its owner Gage Kent were involved in the establishment of a “temp agency” by the name of RJK, Inc., which “was formed in 2008 for long term contract positions in Muscatine, Iowa. As these are long term positions, there is a unique benefits package available to RJK employees. Most positions within RJK, Inc. are on a 12 hour rotating swing shift schedule” (http://www.tempassociates.com/about-us.aspx). According to interviewees, GPC has effectively worked around the NLRA/NLRB by utilizing this “temp agency” to supply workers to the company on a permanent basis to replace the locked out workers.
3. The GPC lockout has effectively resulted in the displacement of a several hundred manufacturing workers. Workers that are displaced in this manner (i.e., via prolonged lockouts) are basically neglected among the accounts of displaced workers. The fact that this labor dispute involved just 360 workers and was the result of a lockout means that it is overlooked by official counts and government statistics regarding worker displacement. As more and more workers are being displaced as a result of prolonged lockouts it seems important to expand the official definition of “worker displacement” to include those individuals whom are displaced in this manner.

4. This is not the case for locked out women workers at GPC that I have interviewed. To date, I have interviewed six women and five of them reported having great difficulty finding reemployment and especially finding new jobs in which the pay is comparable to what they were making at GPC pre-lockout.

5. Neither the company nor the union would provide a list of employees or locked out employees to verify these numbers; however, these numbers are consistent across interviewees’ accounts.

6. My father worked at GPC for nearly 40 years and secured employment with the company for both of my siblings straight out of high school.

7. Boivin, Tremblay, and James (2007) document the medical community’s identification of “Shift Work Sleep Disorder” (SWSD), which links working swing shift to a number of negative effects on workers’ health and quality of life.

8. The role of the International and Local UFCW still needs further exploration. I have made numerous attempts to contact current and former UFCW Local 86D presidents via phone calls and emails, but have not received a response. I sent several messages to the local’s leadership via the local’s website for over a year before the website was disabled. I showed up at a union meeting to introduce myself and this study and distribute my business cards and contact information, but have not heard back from the local’s leadership.

9. Interestingly, three of the interviewees mentioned connections through their daughters’ playing softball that help them find re-employment after being locked out.
References


