

Quality Circles in a Corporate Antiunion Strategy: A Case Study

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This case study explores how the organizational technique of quality circles (QC) was used by a company in the Southwest as part of its overall antiunion strategy during a union campaign. The author explores how the organization of the social process of production into this small group human relations technique, a common component of many quality of work life programs in hundreds of U.S. industries, increased the control that supervisors and managers had over the attitude and behavior of employees during the organizing drive by a major international union. This type of "participative management" technique served the corporate end of remaining nonunion by affecting vital elements of the plant culture. Specifically, the QC program allowed management to exert increased control over the selection and socialization of the work force as well as the work relations and leadership patterns emerging at the plant during the campaign. The author argues that rather than being a technique chosen for the plant primarily because of its democratizing potential and productivity benefits, the quality circle program was specifically chosen as an alternative to unionization for the plant and, as such, was developed as an effective and sophisticated "union busting" tool during the campaign.

Debate over the use of quality circles (QCs) in U.S. industries focuses primarily on the extent to which QCs allow management to attain the goals of higher productivity and better quality, and secondarily on how this type of participative management approach increases worker skills, satisfaction, and participation. Although analytical studies¹ raise serious questions about the efficiency of QCs in attaining any of these goals, the

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1. E. J. Metz, "Caution: Quality Circles Ahead," *Training and Development Journal* (August 1980):71-85, and R. Wood, F. Hull and K. Azumi, "Evaluating QCs—The American Application," *California Management Review* 26 (Autumn 1983): 37-53.

QC trend does not seem to be diminishing. Instead, references are made to the "QC movement" currently sweeping U.S. industry.² The AFL-CIO conservatively reports more than 3,000 QCs in the United States³ and other estimates range as high as one million.⁴ Estimates on the number of companies using QCs hover around 1,000,⁵ including more than 100 major corporations such as Lockheed, Honeywell, American Airlines, General Electric, General Motors, 3-M, and Ford.⁶ Thomas J. Murrin, president of Westinghouse Electric's Public Systems Co., has stated that the use of QCs is the "single most significant explanation for the truly outstanding quality of goods and services" produced in Japan, the home of quality circles.⁷ The spread of QCs into the service sector attests to the almost super-organizational qualities given to the technique.⁸

Most debates over QCs neglect to mention that some QC programs are designed and implemented with the specific objective of avoiding unionization or of undermining existing unions. The fact that most QC programs are developed in non-unionized environments has provoked concern among analysts that this latest organizational technique is being utilized as an alternative to unionization.⁹ Analysts warn that this is perhaps the worst reason to instigate any type of participative management program since, eventually, unions will not support the development of such programs in organized plants if they are viewed as antiunion strategies.¹⁰ The official AFL-CIO position cites the development of QCs

2. Alan D. Rowland, "Combining Quality Control Circles and Work Simplification," *Training and Development Journal* (January 1984): 90-91, and David N. Landon and Steve Moulton, "Quality Circles: What's in Them for Employees?" *Personnel Journal* 65 (June 1986):23-26.

3. "Positive Labor Relations," draft photocopy, Washington, D.C.: AFL-CIO, 1981.

4. Daniel Hoyt, "Quality Circles: Short-Term Fad or Long-Term Trend?" Paper presented at the Southern Belt Labor Conference, Arlington, Texas, University of Texas, March 30, 1984.

5. Greenberg, R. S., "Quality Circles Grow, Stirring Union Worries," *Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 22, 1981, p. 1.

6. Such high estimates deserve suspicion since typically they are calculated by consultants and often include all visited businesses as QC participants, whether QC practices are implemented or not.

7. Seymour Zuker and the *Business Week* Team, *The Reindustrialization of America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982); Akira Ishikawa, "Principles of QC Circle Activities and Their Effects on Productivity in Japan," *Management International Review* 25 (Summer 1985): 33-41.

8. Marje Maser and Elaine Randall, "Implementation at Mount Sinai Medical Center of Greater Miami," *The Quality Circle Journal* 4 (August 1981): 16-19; Jane P. Elvins, "Communication in Quality Circles; Members' Perceptions of Their Participation and Its Effects on Relations Organizational Variables," *Group and Organization Studies* 10 (December 1985): 479-508.

9. Ted Mills, "Human Resources—Why the New Concern?" *Harvard Business Review* 53 (March-April 1975): 120-134; Robert Cole, "Some Principles Concerning Union Involvement in Quality Circles and Other Employee Involvement Programs." Paper presented at Employee Participation Workshop, Solidarity House, March 1980; Bruce A. Nissen, "Union Problems with QWL Programs: A UAW Case Study," North Central Sociological Association, 1986; Mike Parker, *Inside the Circle: A Union Guide to QWL* (Boston: South End Press, 1985).

10. Cole, "Some Principles Concerning Involvement."

as a step forward in labor-management cooperation but emphasizes that QCs must be developed within the collective bargaining process.

Within the ranks of different unions, however, opinions vary. Glenn Watts, president of the Communications Workers, is dismayed at the acceptance, by thousands of companies, of "narrow participation programs" such as QCs. "[T]hey are the hottest-selling item in the management consulting field."¹¹ Similarly Don Ephlin, UAW vice-president who heads the union's Ford Department, warns that the labor and personnel consultants who push QCs are either presenting them as effective anti-union operations or unrealistic means to obtain high productivity, or both.¹² Thomas Donahue, AFL-CIO secretary treasurer, has expressed some concerns over QCs and other quality of worklife (QWL) programs:

Too many employers are more interested in programs that offer 101 ways to make cosmetic changes that try to fool the worker into believing that it's a great place to work and that management really cares, despite the lousy pay and rotten conditions. Too many union-busting consultants are promoting these quality of worklife programs as an alternative to worker participation through trade unionism. That way, without the protection of a union contract, any concessions to workers can be revoked as easily as they were given. At best, the quality of worklife group concept poses a problem to the labor movement because of the potential that exists for management to penetrate and influence small, informal work groups to a degree, and on a scale . . . never dreamed of.¹³

In addition to these concerns among academics and union leaders, some authors have written personal accounts of their own or other worker's experience in quality circles.¹⁴ On the whole, however, we lack

11. Glen Watts, "Analysis Section," *Daily Labor Report*, No. 96 (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of National Affairs, 1982).

12. Don Ephlin, "Analysis Section," *Daily Labor Report*, No. 95 (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of National Affairs, 1982).

13. Thomas R. Donahue, "Labor Looks at Quality of Worklife Programs." Paper presented at University of Massachusetts, Labor Research Center, January 7, 1982. There are some within organized labor who see all worker involvement programs as techniques of suppressing unionism. They don't consider it a coincidence that a common aspect of all participation programs is the attempt to persuade employees that the program will eliminate the adversarial facets of employee-management relations. If this attempt is successful, unions can be more effectively portrayed as "third parties" trying to intrude in the affairs of mutual benefit to the workers and the company. Even in companies with unions, the goal of the plans is often to "reduce grievances." In companies where the network of union stewards is resented by management, such a goal is usually a disguised attempt to undermine the effectiveness of the union. (See Parker, *Inside the Circle*.)

14. Dwight Hansen, "True Confession: My Life in a Quality Circle," *Labor Notes* (August 26, 1981): 8-10; Martin Glaberman, "Is It Quality or Is It Control in the Quality Control Circle?" *Labor Notes* (August 26, 1981): 9-10. Also see Parker, *Inside the Circle*.

detailed studies of how quality circles and other participative programs can be used by management to undermine or prevent unionism. The research reported in this paper is the first, exploratory stage of such a study.

This article describes and analyzes the use of the QC as a managerial weapon against unionization at one high-tech industrial subsidiary of a multinational corporation in the Southwest. This case study documents how, rather than being a force conducive to the democratization of the workplace, the QC was used as an organizational technique of social control facilitating the identification, isolation, and manipulation of pro-union employees during a union campaign.

The data were gathered through participant and informal observation and interviews during a seven-month, in-plant study (from August 1982 to March 1983) on the utilization of QCs in a corporate antiunion strategy. During that time, the company, under the guidance of internal and external consultants hired by the parent corporation, conducted an intense effort to avoid unionization. The author became involved as a researcher on QC development, working directly under the guidance of the plant social psychologist charged with QC development.¹⁵

During the time of the study, the author attended 13 QC meetings at which he recorded patterns of interaction between the facilitators (supervisors) and the workers. He also interviewed four team facilitators, using a non-directive format, and had substantive discussions with eight more during their team meetings and on the production floor. He also interviewed the personnel director regarding the role of QCs at the plant. All these sources of information about the nature of the QC experiment at the company supplemented extensive field notes and lengthy discussions with the social psychologist in charge of QC development.

The Plant

The plant under study manufactures sutures and medical devices for the domestic market. It is purely a production plant. The research and

15. The author initially contacted the plant management in August 1982, when he was working at the New Mexico Health Systems Agency. A director of a local employee assistance program suggested that the author contact the social psychologist who was in charge of a very innovative quality of work life program for a major manufacturer of sutures and medical devices. The social psychologist agreed to serve as "gatekeeper" to research on quality circles and quality of work life, and also suggested that the research focus on the role QC played in the antiunion campaign. During the information-gathering process, the author concluded that while research must be objective to be valid, it cannot be neutral when it uncovers orchestrated deceit and intentional manipulation of human beings. Therefore, he spoke out against the company at a public forum early in 1983, and afterwards was barred from entering the plant. He continued to gather information about the antiunion use of QCs by interviewing 20 workers about their experiences during the campaign.

development activities of the corporation remain on the eastern seaboard with the corporate headquarters of the parent corporation. This creates a territorial division between the braintrust of the corporation and the production unit. The company has a reputation for being a respectable, not particularly antilabor, employer. In fact, Fortune 500 surveys consistently show the parent corporation to be one of the most respected companies in the U.S.

The site in New Mexico represents the second southwestern plant established by the medical products subsidiary. The expansion into the western United States in general, and New Mexico specifically, was reportedly motivated by the same reasons that encourage the efforts to remain union-free: cutting costs. As one manager reported:

[The corporation] simply has to cut back on employee wages and benefits. [The company] is paying out the nose in wages and benefits. Most of our plants are union. Here (in the West) we have a better chance of keeping them out not just for now but forever.¹⁶

The Union that they were trying to keep out has amicable relations with the parent corporation at other plants.

Encouragement to build in the area came from the city and state governments, which are anxious to develop the growth of "clean industry" in the Rio Grande Valley. An Industrial Revenue Bond for \$10 million as well as an Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development served as inducements to build in the outskirts of the city on property sold to the corporation by a state university.¹⁷

The plant opened in 1981 and during the time of study employed approximately 288 workers, around 220 of whom worked on the assembly line, in maintenance, or in shipping and receiving. Of the 220 employees in the bargaining unit, 65 percent were Hispanics and 35 percent non-Hispanics (including Anglos, blacks, native Americans, and Asians). Approximately 80 percent of the work force was female (174 out of 220),

16. All quotes attributed to managers and workers at the plant, if not otherwise cited, are drawn from the researchers' personal field notes.

17. The IRB gives financial assistance to developers in form of tax breaks and lower financing. The UDA Grant is administered by the City and requires that the employer hire a large percentage of the labor force from a designated low income area (pocket of poverty). Several politicians who represent this area have charged that the company has failed to abide by this provision of the agreement. The immediate effect of this conflict has been action by the city to enlarge the "pocket of poverty" boundaries.

including 114 Hispanic women and 55 non-Hispanic women.¹⁸ The turnover is less than 5 percent per year. Estimates vary regarding the ultimate projected size of the work force. Plant sources report a top work force of about 600 employees while politicians involved in locating the plant in New Mexico mentioned that the company claimed at that time a maximum employment between 1,000 and 1,200 within five years. Sources at the Employment Security Commission have also backed up this figure. At the time of the study, the plant operated two shifts, with a third shift planned.

The Organization of the Labor Process

The plant is located in a handsome, one-story white concrete building on a hill overlooking the north-south expressway of the city. Architecturally well designed, it offers a number of conveniences that make it one of the better workplaces in town.

The entire building is essentially a shell, with office spaces in the administrative area carved out with noise-proof panels. The heart of the production process takes place in a large, clean-air environment where five of the seven production procedures take place. The production room especially gives one a feeling of emptiness at first glance since there are no separating walls—only the machines at which workers wrap, press, wind or otherwise manipulate the materials necessary to produce sutures and ligatory clips. Each production department has its own area within the production room.

There are various production departments at the plant. Each department is in charge of a specific aspect of the production process. Each individual has her own work station and she “sets up” her machine by herself. The machines are in close enough proximity to allow limited interaction among the workers but since great concentration is required for the maneuvering of needles and devices among high-powered presses, very little sustained interaction takes place.

Each department is divided into sub-areas, each supervised by the department supervisor. For example, the process of swaging, or attaching the needle to the suture material, is subdivided into areas A and B. Each

18. For a discussion of interaction between the QC type of control structure developed in this paper and gender, see Louise Lamphere and Grenier, Guillermo J. “Women, Unions and ‘Participative Management’: Organizing in the Sunbelt,” in Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgen (Eds.), *Women and the Politics of Empowerment: Perspectives from the Workplace and the Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

area composes a QC with a supervisor, or team leader. The supervisors have desks on the production floor next to their areas.¹⁹

The starting wage at the time of the study was \$4.25 an hour, with a \$.20 increase after successful completion of the six-month probationary period. There is usually a plantwide increase on the first of July each year. In general, workers receive increases as they "master" the various "skill blocks" or production areas. In this type of job enlargement program, the more quickly an employee masters a skill block the sooner she moves on to a new area, thereby becoming eligible for a wage increase. The highest paid production workers earned between \$5 and \$5.25 per hour, and maintenance workers earned between \$6 and \$8 per hour. These figures compared well with average area salaries. As the personnel director reported: "We did a survey of major manufacturers in the (greater metropolitan area) area and found we paid as well, and mostly better than every single one of them."

However, he also mentioned that the survey excluded unionized companies in the area on the grounds that they had "national contracts and are not representative of the area."²⁰ Workers at other company plants, starting at the same production operations, get paid from \$2 to \$5 more, depending on the geographic area of the country.²¹

Organization of the Social Process: Quality Circles

According to the QC developer, corporate planners decided, in 1979, before "brick one" was laid for this plant, 1) that the plant would remain non-union at all cost, and 2) that the QC would be developed as an alternative to unionization. The company implemented a "new design" philosophy of managerial control. The philosophy, set out in an employee handout, claims to "[m]aintain flexibility," to "[k]eep communications open," and to "be flexible to change."²²

19. The desks faced away from the machines until, during the most intense part of the campaign, they were turned to face the machines, reportedly as a means of added, subtle surveillance over the work force.

20. Average hourly earnings for manufacturing employees in the area was \$7.83 per hour, according to the New Mexico Employment Security Department ("New Mexico and Albuquerque Area Hours and Earnings Estimates," February 1984, p. 1). At the time, the most accurate information showed that more than two-thirds of union members in the Albuquerque area reported a household income above \$5,000 compared to 59 percent for the city's labor force as a whole. Almost one-quarter were in the \$10,000-\$15,000 bracket (21 percent, city) and 48 percent in the \$15,000-\$30,000 range (37 percent, city); 18 percent received more than \$30,000 per year (21 percent, city) (from the "Human Services Needs Assessment: Special Analysis" conducted by the Planning and Allocations Division of the United Way of Greater Albuquerque, 1981).

21. Grenier, Guillermo J., research field notes, 1982-1983.

22. From "Management Philosophy and Employee Commitment," a company document given to employees upon hiring, 1982.

High participation in this form of organizational design means specifically that several channels of communications exist between employees and management. In attempting to flatten out the hierarchical structure of the organization, communication channels between the production floor and top management were pronounced "open" by means of the written word—the "Open Line," a bulletin board question-and-answer format—or by simply walking into the office of the plant manager and discussing grievances or solutions to problems—the "open door." The purpose of the design is clearly stated in the company philosophy document: Anyone "can present themselves and receive fair and responsive treatment from this company without the need or intervention of a third party such as a union."²³

As mentioned, each production area is divided into sub-areas, each comprising a QC. Although further divisions were planned, during the time of study each production area was divided into two sub-areas, each area operating on a rotating shift basis. The QC leader is the supervisor of the entire production area. QCs range in size from 7 to 15 people representing day and night shifts. Meetings occur at shift change, on company time, once a week. Each QC meets on a specified day and attendance is required. Part of the evaluation on overall job performance is based on attendance of QC meetings and participation in discussions. Although the agenda is controlled by the facilitator, QC members are, in theory, encouraged to openly discuss any type of problem or concern.²⁴

The importance of the QCs to the plant organization is exemplified by official management rationale for the rotating shift. In answering an employee question, "How did you ever decide on this rotating shift?", the plant manager responded:

As I've said before . . . in response to a similar question, I believe rotating shifts are essential to make the QC successful. If we allowed shift selections based on seniority, we would lose a lot of people who do not want to work nights permanently and this would break up our QCs. Without stability, the QCs will not be able to function as well as a unit.²⁵

23. From "Management Philosophy and Employee Commitment."

24. Pro-union workers charge that the benefits and functions of this freedom changed as the campaign progressed; at first, discussion of the union issue served as a way to identify pro-union employees, later, suppressing the discussion of pro-union views served to isolate the same employees.

25. From "Employee Questions and Company Answers Regarding the Union Organizing Campaign," a company document, 1982.

The primary focus of QC discussion is manifestly on production numbers and fostering team spirit. Weekly production figures for team members are discussed at each meeting, highlighting the deficiencies of low producers as well as the merits of those who met the weekly quota. Team members also are evaluated by their peers at the meetings. Peer evaluation, according to management philosophy, allows the "true individual to come out and fully develop in the social environment" of the plant. The evaluations are important since they form part of the overall performance evaluation used by management to determine raises and continued employment past the probationary period.²⁶

Evaluation criteria include traditional items such as "Attention to neatness" and "Takes pride in work" as well as measures of how well the individual shows "commitment to company philosophy" follows "norms established for QC," exhibits a "positive attitude toward self and other," and shows an understanding of "quality of work life philosophy." The evaluations are read to all members at the meetings. A poor evaluation from QC peers can result, under company guidelines, in a raise refusal or termination.

The use of QC as an alternative to unionism at the New Mexico plant was seen as experimental from the very beginning. Local management was under the impression that if the plan "works" in New Mexico, it would serve as a prototype for future corporate designs throughout the country. Indeed, management personnel from other "new design" corporations visited the plant on a two-day tour in January 1983 to inspect its physical and social organizational techniques.

The manager in charge of QC development was not an engineer or production expert. Rather, the task of QC development was assigned to a Ph.D. social psychologist from one of the major behavioral science universities in the country. In one of his most candid moments he confided that he was hired for three reasons: he is a Chicano, he hates unions, and he is trained in manipulating people. He understood that the main reason why the QC concept was being used at the plant was to keep out the union. He understood his job to be the development of the QC concept, in his words, to "its full potential" as a "union-busting" tool. This meant that he had to convert the overall antiunion goals of the company during

26. The performance evaluation criteria were 1) quality 2) quantity 3) absenteeism and 4) team support. Team support is measured by participation in QC issues, attitude, support of QC members and company policy.

the campaign into strategy and action on the shop floor and in the QC meetings.²⁷

Company planners assessed that taking advantage of the cost cutting benefits of a Southwestern location required that the company remain non-union. Although this logic flies in the face of recent research by Freeman and Medoff²⁸ which signals the productivity benefits of a unionized workforce, it served to justify the use of the quality circle system. The social psychologist made this clear on various occasions: That is why quality circles are being used at this plant, he explained, to keep out the union.

We have made out five- and ten-year projections and they are based on the assumption that we will not be a union plant. Each year we keep out the union we make \$3 million dollars. And that's at our present level of employment. When we reach our top (600) we will be making \$5 million dollars every year we keep out the union.

Workers interviewed expressed ambivalence to the QC as a form of "participative management." A typical opinion of the QC was voiced by one of the older workers: "They give us the shit decisions. Who am I to fire somebody? We all need jobs and raises. That could be me out there." According to one supervisor, not only do QC members have no real power but they are not trained in decision making and therefore feel uncomfortable giving any input on company policy. "They walk in off the street and are in a quality circle. So what? It means nothing. . . . My people sit there and wait. . . . They'd rather be out the door."

Research Findings

The participative management program at this plant served the corporate end of remaining non-union by affecting vital elements of the plant culture. Specifically, the QC program allowed management to exert control over various aspects of the control system of the firm and utilized

27. Although his immediate superior, the personnel manager, considered him brilliant, he sometimes faced difficulties communicating his behaviorist ideas to the front line supervisors (facilitators). One supervisor confided that the social psychologist didn't give them enough credit: "He does his best but he thinks he's better than we are. And that is a problem." Nevertheless, he was one of the few upper managers that the employees saw constantly on the production floor. He served as the link between the floor and upper management.

28. Richard Freeman and James L. Medoff, *What Do Unions Do?* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

this control in its effort to maintain non-union status. By appealing to the "team" or QC as the force determining normative patterns at the plant level and relying on peer pressure to assert those patterns, management succeeded in controlling the selection and socialization of the work force as well as the work relations and leadership patterns emerging at the plant during the campaign. The discussion begins with the effects of the QC program on selection.

Effects on Personnel Selection

The techniques of employee selection followed management requirements to identify individuals who fit into the corporate union-free culture of the "new design" plant. The social psychologist stated:

We have two ways of selecting employees. The psycho-motor skill criteria, can you make this widget with accuracy, quality, all that that's the easiest to select for. We have a training center at [a near by street] where we spot the good trainees and the slobs.

The second criteria [sic] is person-environment fit. Here we have to cull out those people that might have a negative impact on the environment of the plant. One of those impacts is unionization. . . . They have to fit the QC environment and keep out the union environment. . . . We have to catch them at the door.

The effects of the QC on the work force thus begin even before an applicant is officially hired. Each potential employee is first interviewed by a member of the personnel department and, if she survives this initial interview, is referred to the plant manager or a department supervisor for another interview. The final stage in this process is an interview by two QC members or future "peers" from the circle to which the applicant will be assigned. These two workers have the authority to hire or to veto the hiring of the applicant. (Of course the applicant must have received prior approval from the personnel department and the supervisor or she will not reach the stage of being interviewed by QC members.) Thus, it is impressed on the new employee during the hiring process that she is dependent upon her fellow QC members for her job. They "hired" her, and, as will be seen later, she is dependent upon their continued good will in order to continue her employment. This system creates enormous pressure on the new employee to quickly gain the friendship of her co-workers. The failure to do so can result in termination or raise denial. The

desire to conform, then, normally a question of individual temperament, becomes at this organization a condition of employment.

The QC program is reviewed during the potential worker's initial interview with the personnel department. The topic of QCs is presented as a "non-traditional" and clearly superior form of employee organization. Subtly, the interviewer brings up the topic of unionization. Aware that directly asking about union sentiments violates a National Labor Relations law, the QC developer reported:

In 90 percent of the cases people tell you what they think about unions without [the interviewer] asking directly. [The personnel administrator in charge of interviews] is pretty good at it.²⁹

One employee related her experience with the hiring process at the plant. She had transferred to the New Mexico facility from another corporate plant where she had belonged to the local union. She had no trouble obtaining the transfer since her experience was needed at the new site. Quitting the union, however, was a prerequisite for the transfer application to be considered. After processing the papers necessary to quit the union, the company informed her that a transfer was not possible. She would have to quit her present job and then apply for employment at the new facility just like everyone else. A supervisor in New Mexico told her that this was a pro forma procedure and that her extensive experience in the manufacture of sutures would ensure her employment. She moved having been guaranteed a job.

She was interviewed three times by the same personnel administrator. After the first two interviews, she was certain that employment was out of the question. She talked to a supervisor friend who advised her that she needed to 'bad-mouth' the union. Apparently the personnel administrator was suspicious of her previous union involvement:

[My supervisor friend] told me, "tell her how hard it was for you to get out of the union". . . . So I went back and she asked me how I felt about the union and I told her that, you know, I had a very hard time, you know, and that I guess it was not good if they didn't want to let you out, right? and she said "yea". . . . [A]fter that I was hired.

29. Sometimes not good enough, since the NLRB did file charges of discrimination against the company. The government agency charged that in four cases workers were not only asked about pro-union sentiments but also were refused employment when a positive sentiment was identified. The company was forced to pay \$50,000 in back pay to the individuals involved.

There is an organizational commitment to expose the new hires to the "positive" aspects of plant culture before they are introduced to the plant. At the local training center mentioned, for example, the training used to be done on the merit system. High-producing workers were allowed to volunteer to be trainers. Management selected the volunteers by QC group. Unfortunately for management, most of these volunteers were pro-union workers. When the pro-union workers outnumbered the anti-union trainers at the training center, the policy was changed. The training duties were then interpreted as affording relatively new hires an opportunity to receive a type of job enrichment experience. Management felt that new hires were those most likely to exhibit anti-union attitudes. After that point, most trainers had less than three months' experience working at the plant. This apparent lowering of qualifications was justified on the grounds of "giving experience" to the recent hires. Towards the end of the campaign, no pro-union worker served as a trainer for the new hires.³⁰

Summarizing, the characteristics of the QC program at the plant served management with an efficient method of screening applicants. By emphasizing the non-traditional aspects of plant organization and the importance of peer approval in attaining and maintaining a job, applicants were made to feel special and dependent. Careful screening allowed management greater control in the development of a work culture homogeneously in tune with corporate antiunion priorities.

Effects on Socialization of the Work Force

After an employee was hired, the QC program served as the primary structure socializing the employees into the normative patterns of the plant work culture. During the campaign this meant that management

30. This plant is not unique in the emphasis placed on 'correct' selection of the work force. Management literature strongly stresses the importance of selection of the work force. (See Robert Tannebaum and Warren H. Schmidt, "How to Choose a Leadership Pattern," in E. Williams (Ed.), *Participative Management: Concepts, Theory and Implementation*, 17-30. (Atlanta: Georgia State University, School of Business Administration, 1982). Socialization into the plant culture begins with effective selection of applicants. Anti-union literature offers the same emphasis. Employers hoping to maintain non-union status are warned against too many blacks or Hispanics. A female work force is desirable, however, since they are easily intimidated and less likely than men to join unions ("Union Busting Today: Rats Teach Old Dogs New Tricks," *Dollars and Sense*, No. 85 (March 1983): 8-9, 18). A personnel administrator remarked that Indians were good, too, since they were "naive" about the labor process: "Bring me an Indian and I'll hire him on the spot." The company's legal labor consultant emphasized the screening for pro-union sentiments by checking the background of the potential hire: "If the guy belonged to a union once, chances are you don't want him in there." The uniqueness of the QC program derives from the extent it exerts a pervasive influence in the selection process.

utilized QCs as the focal point of the attack against the union and its supporters, attempting to control an influence they considered negative to the development of production and social forces of the plant. Team meetings served as the major dissemination point for information concerning management's views of the union as well as the most efficient medium for the identification, and subsequent isolation, of employees who deviated from these views as well as providing the necessary strategic support to antiunion employees.

The organization made no secret of the fact that it was extremely selective in its choice of workers and, indeed, made an effort to project the image to its employees that they are "special." The company attempted to instill in its employees a sense that, because of their special qualities, they had been hand-picked to participate in this innovative and experimental program.

If the employer is successful in establishing the attitude that the employees are somehow specially suited to participate in this QC program, it will reap the benefits in several ways. An employee who has been hired because of her special qualities will be more anxious to cooperate in making the program a success. She will be eager to justify the employer's judgment of her as one who can successfully fit into this new program. If problems arise she may be more likely to question her own "special" qualities rather than blaming the program's inadequacies. And, importantly, she will be less likely to resort to "traditional" solutions (i.e., unionism) to problems that might arise since she is one of the hand-picked employees especially suited to participate in the "non-traditional" program. A resort to "traditional" solutions would be an admission that she does not, in fact, possess those special qualities.³¹

During the campaign, the QC system became the symbol of the "new design," participative philosophy of the company's "enlightened" management. Anyone accused of supporting unionization was simultaneously labeled "anti-company" which meant anti-QC, anti-innovation, and anti-team spirit. Union supporters relate the impossibility of making co-workers see that the union too was "pro-company" and not anti-QC.

31. In this respect the QC program at the plant had a great deal in common with the T-group techniques. As described in an unpublished AFL-CIO report, T-group and similar psychological techniques are dangerous because "1) there is great potential for manipulating such a process so as to convince the participants that all of the problems in the workplace are really ones of personal conflict and therefore personally their responsibility . . . [and] 2) there is great potential in such a process for imposing the cultural and social values of a particular group on others who are not members of that group."

Company communications, however, succeeded in defining the values of the pro-union people as inherently different than the values of pro-company workers. The former group was identified as “pro-conflict,” “anti-cooperation,” and deviant along moral lines (violent and untrustworthy). The pro-company people, on the other hand, supported the normative standards associated with cooperation, team spirit and innovation. The QC program represented all of these values and encouraged the implied behaviors.

Effects on Work Relations

To make full use of the union-fighting potential of the QC, management developed a three-pronged strategy against the union, using the QC as the basic mechanism of control. Each one of the strategic decisions had a profound impact on the work relations between workers themselves and between supervisors and workers. A quote from the QC developer summarizes the elements of the antiunion strategies used at the QC level:

We are using the “traditional” management approach (against unionization) where management gives the workers information not necessarily solicited by them but nevertheless important in informing them about the antiunion stance of the company.

Another approach [we are using] is the “pro-active” approach [used by some teams]. The facilitator sort of orchestrates and initiates the discussion of the union at QC meetings and in that way gets across certain ideas about the union to employees.

The third approach is the “individual conflict” approach where individuals already known to be pro-union are isolated at the QC level and individual level. We try to keep them isolated from other QC members and at the same time confront them individually concerning the union issue.

The Traditional Approach

Facilitators met at least once a week with upper management to receive the official documents regarding the union campaign. At the beginning of the campaign the information to be passed on to the QCs was communicated to the facilitators in memos or by word of mouth during formal or informal conversations. During the QC meetings, the facilitators would pass on the information in an idiosyncratic, unstructured

manner. Predictably, some facilitators stepped over the lines of legality and a rash of unfair labor practice charges followed.

As the campaign progressed, however, communication became more formal. Facilitators were instructed to read memos from upper management verbatim at their QC meetings. Information was coordinated so that all QCs heard the same memos in their weekly meetings. The information read was usually of a reactive character. Immediately after a union meeting or a leafletting of the plant, for example, memos were quickly distributed and read to all the QCs within a five-workday period. The social psychologist was charged with composing an answer to union charges and he utilized all his communication skills in the task.

At one QC meeting the facilitator was instructed to read a memo answering union charges of illegal interrogations of pro-union employees by management personnel. Reading from the skillfully written document, the facilitator first read an apology for having to read the document, then blamed the union for creating an inflexible situation which required the reading of the document, and then brushed off the charges by saying that the legal aspects of the union campaign were so "hair-splitting" that only lawyers understood the difference between interrogation and being concerned about an employee's welfare.³²

The Proactive Approach

In QCs where there was sizable union support, management usually had two supervisors present during meetings. Besides the QC-leading facilitator, the social psychologist or another member of the personnel department was present. This often enabled the development of a scenario in which facilitator and personnel administrator, seemingly in a spontaneous manner, brought out a particularly interesting subject concerning the union. Not all facilitators were skilled enough to utilize the "proactive" approach, according to the social psychologist, but one QC was utilizing it very efficiently.

One observation of this QC made clear the design and purpose of the proactive approach. After discussing the weekly production numbers briefly, the facilitator noticed that one of the employees up for evaluation was not present. He remarked that she was probably home "watching TV." Immediately after this, he said, "By the way, did any of you watch '60

32. Besides communications at the QC level, management utilized the "Open Line" and bulletin board in the so called "traditional approach" to fighting the union.

Minutes' last night?" Several people raised their hands, including the female personnel administrator present. The facilitator asked her what she thought of the piece on the "union and Coors." She replied that it had been interesting because it showed how unions "don't leave people" alone, even if voted out. The facilitator then asked her to talk about it, "for the benefit of those who didn't see it." She related selected points of the report, emphasizing the intransigence of the union in face of employee opposition and the company's good will. After she finished, two employees made remarks supporting the company's position against the union. The facilitator commented that the show was a good example of how "unions don't care about people, they just care about dues." One employee agreed and said, "this is a good job. Remember the economy." No pro-union sentiments were expressed.

The importance of this scenario is twofold. First, as the social psychologist informed me after the meeting, the two management individuals had discussed the topic earlier that day at a facilitator meeting and had decided upon the scenario as a way to talk about management's anti-union stance. Second, it allowed the facilitator to give positive reinforcement to two strongly antiunion employees.

The Individual Conflict Approach

In November 1982, the company informed corporate headquarters at a local meeting that it was instigating a "psychological strategy" against the pro-union people. The key to this strategy was the identification of pro-union people and this was best done at the QC level. Facilitators were instructed to maintain a "rating scale" for each QC member. On this scale, a + 2 designation represented a strong antiunion stand while a - 2 identified those employees with strong pro-union attitudes. The balance of the ratings capture the essence of the psychological strategy. As the social psychologist put it, "We have to identify the pro-union people and deprive them of status. We have to hold them up as losers. Highlight them and their weaknesses." The official management rhetoric labeled union supporters as "negative" influences and "losers" while anti-union employees were referred to as "positive" forces and "winners." The official company slogan during the election was "Be a winner. Vote Company."

Once identified, a union supporter became the untouchable of the plant. Because they were so closely watched, other employees, even those sympathetic to the union cause, avoided them. As one 25-year-old production worker related, "She is my friend, you know. But now I can't be

seen with her or they'll get on my case. She ain't screwing up any more than I am but they hassle her more than me. I don't need it."

Managers were directed to step in on conversations between pro and antiunion workers. The coffeebreak interactions became something of a joke among union supporters. "If we want to take a break, they (management) come out of the woodwork." This was not a coincidence. In one weekly management meeting on strategy the decision was made to implement this "new technique" of watching the interactions of pro-union people. The social psychologist stated:

I go up, start talking to them, go to coffee with them, take the same 10 minutes they do, came back to the shop floor with them. The thing is to control their influence, their interactions.

For the psychological campaign to be effective at the individual level, the "button" or weakness of each pro-union worker had to be identified. Sometimes this meant ignoring individuals completely. Other times, an undue and specific type of attention was paid to a worker. One woman, who candidly confessed a concern with her appearance, reported various times when management personnel would come on the production floor "and stare at me and talk about me whispering . . . for 15 or 20 minutes sometimes . . . and that bothered me." At all times the psychological campaign meant treating pro-union people differently than antiunion people. Perhaps nowhere is this more obvious than in the treatment of individuals who changed from anti- to pro-union sympathies. A young production workers reports a typical experience of union supporters:

After a point I guess they found out I like the union. . . . They ignored me. . . . Before they would invite me to go party all the time . . . (Three middle and upper management people) especially. . . . After that, not even a "hi". . . . They made faces at me when they saw me . . . told me I was a disgrace. . . . The same people that liked me before!

The "personal touch" in authority became associated with the normal method of controlling the work force. When deviation from the expected occurred, the approach became more direct. Facilitators approached pro-union workers to express their "surprise" and "disappointment" at their attitudes and to ask if there was anything they could do to make working there more pleasant. If the worker responded like many often did, by asserting her belief in unionism while also continuing to

work "for" the company, the facilitator typically responded with "then there is nothing more to say." The line drawn, the personal touch is withdrawn as if it had been a benefit of compliance with company norms. The non-compliant were treated, if they were lucky, with indifference, and more likely with open hostility from fellow workers as well as management. At QC meetings, especially, union supporters were ignored and antiunion members encouraged to take charge of the discussion.

Production and quality issues became less and less important to the agenda of QCs as the psychological strategy developed. Only the most pressing issues of this kind were discussed at length. Again, quoting the QC developer: "As the guy in charge of QC development, I have to keep the QC in tune with company goals. The goal now is to keep out the union. . . . If production suffers, we have three other plants that can take up the slack." Most of the time was spent elaborating the managerial perspective on unionization. Indeed, the QC format allowed management the opportunity to give "captive audience speeches" every week. The personnel director admitted that the QCs had become "conflict groups" rather than production groups.

Effects on Leadership

The conflict function of the QC required retraining of many facilitators. There were frequent training sessions on the proper way to handle the subtleties of the campaign and the use of the QC in it. The legal consultants were especially worried about the legal ramifications of terminating pro-union employees and emphasized that each facilitator should have "clean termination records." Specifically, during one training session on the legal aspects of terminations, they were warned that "if a firing occurs, they better be able to make a good case for it being for objective reasons rather than just anti-union sentiments." Facilitators were given a confidential document on the type of behavior expected of them during the union campaign. Instructions included detailed answers to anticipated questions by QC members followed by the explicit order, "When talking to employees, made sure you stress that *you are giving your own personal views and opinions and are not expressing the views and opinions of management.*"³³

33. "Confidential Supervisors' Guidelines," company document developed by external legal consultants, 1982.

The issue of controlling pro-union attitudes and behavior dominated the role functions of facilitators during the campaign. In general, a good facilitator during the campaign was one who could keep tight control of his or her QC, while being perceived as "open" to QC suggestions. As one of the two female facilitators put it: "We hire them antiunion by screening for them. It's my job to keep them that way."

Not all facilitators supported this use of the QC. One particularly disgruntled facilitator responded to the question, "What is your main function as a QC leader?" in the following manner:

We are getting paid to keep people down. To keep out the union . . . The company treats the workers like kids. They are afraid that if we don't tell them what to think and do, they will vote in the union. . . . My job is to keep the union out.

At the QC level, control is exerted by limiting the interaction of the members. A good facilitator always controls the QC and not vice versa: "He is always talking, building the agenda, dominating by key questions." Anti-union employees were encouraged to participate in QC discussions while pro-union employees were actively discouraged from speaking. All this accompanied the appearance of openness and flexibility. During training sessions with the facilitators, the social psychologist emphasized the importance of appearing flexible while maintaining tight control over the QC meeting. In at least one case, the social psychologist instructed a facilitator on ways by which he could make QC members "come down" on union supporters while keeping management out of the conflict.

Ultimately, if a facilitator was unable to control the "negative" influences in his or her QC, the existence of the QC was undermined and the abilities of the supervisor questioned by management. One particularly verbal pro-union QC had its meetings cancelled indefinitely because of the inability of the facilitator to "control" his QC. Specifically, the strong union supporters exerted their influence and became the informal QC leaders. Although they did not discuss the union during QC meetings, they set the tempo of the meeting and, in effect, usurped the tight agenda control of the facilitator. One worker in the QC reported the facilitator's frustration when she demanded clarification of a certain work rule and would not be put off by his attempts to move on with the agenda. He objected that her insistence made it impossible for them to "work as a team." She, on the other hand, asserted her right to know why a certain aspect of the work process was organized as it was. Soon after the incident,

meetings were canceled. The social psychologist reported that the QC was “moving away” from the facilitator, who required a bit more training in the “art of industrial manipulation.”

The event provided management with a benchmark for measuring the ability of other facilitators to control their QC interactions during the campaign. After this suspension of QC activity, other facilitators were pressured to put an end to pro-union discussions in their areas. Sometimes this resulted in heavy-handed, if efficient, threats against pro-union people at QC meetings. The following excerpt from a QC meeting is an example of an efficient facilitator’s addressing of the “counterproductive” activities of union supporters:

And another type of counterproductive activity which is the most blatant . . . and from what I can see, I can see some people losing their job over this real soon, that is, creating an atmosphere [that] in any way harbors failure or excessive frustration for people out there on the floor. And that is someone coming over to you and saying . . . “you are being treated unfairly.” Now if any of you have ever worked at another plant . . . [you know] you’ve got it good here . . . Anyone that is going around telling you over and over that “it’s not right, they’re treating you unfairly.” That person is on their way out as far as [another facilitator] and I are concerned . . . And unfortunately I’d hate to see it happen to someone I really like, [that] I think is doing a good job overall. That kind of attitude does more to hurt productivity than anything else. And that attitude has gotten to be the norm of [our production unit] and we can’t allow that. . . . I think . . . part of the problem is a lot of people in manufacturing have given too much as far as some of the freedom we’ve gotten. . . . [Now we are back] to this point . . . where this is the alternative, “Get your butt in gear and do your work or get out. . . .” If you don’t want to do that, there are plenty of places out there that will take you . . . but there won’t be too many. . . .

This type of coercion utilized by QC leaders was typical during the campaign. Indeed, the development of the QC as a “conflict group” rather than a production group was seen, by the social psychologist, as one of the few positive consequences derived from the organizing effort by the union. As the social psychologist stated, “One good thing about this [campaign] is that the QC is developing into a good union-busting tool.”

Effects on Rewards and Punishment

Workers are encouraged to “evaluate” and “reward” the performance of peers. They are encouraged to criticize each other during team meetings in ways traditionally performed by management.

One worker related an episode in which his supervisor approached him and told him, confidentially, that another member of the QC (a union supporter) was failing to meet her production quotas. The supervisor then suggested that the worker should mention this at the next meeting and that he should criticize his QC member for failing to meet the quotas. When he failed to bring up this matter at the next meeting, the worker was casually asked by his supervisor if he had something to discuss with the QC. When he replied that he did not have anything to say, the supervisor pointedly asked him if he had not wanted to mention to the QC his coworker's failure to meet her quotas and to criticize her for her failure.

Not only were workers encouraged to criticize each other individually but also QCs were often pitted against each other by the facilitator. Several QCs contained discussions similar to the following:

FAC: "This QC is not as bad (in negative attitudes) as Team (X) but I have to tell you (to shape up) or I'd be playing favorites. . . ."

WORKER: "Team (Y) is the only one that wants the union. . . ."

FAC: "Team (Y) complains too much. I wish I could take this QC over there and do their job. I know we could do it much better."

The QC structure provided an excellent forum for pitting workers against workers and thus increased management control over their behavior and attitude towards unionism.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show how a QC program was used by a company to maintain non-union status during an organizing campaign. The program served as a pervasive mechanism of control influencing almost all aspects of plant culture including shift rotation, the hiring and training of employees, and the socialization of workers into accepted normative patterns. This control mechanism was utilized during the campaign to identify, isolate and otherwise manipulate the pro-union employees within the work force.

The quality circle technique of organizing employees is presented essentially as a system of external controls that developed in response to the problem of controlling the attitudes and behavior of the workforce. Under the guise of "participative management," the dynamics inherent to a small, hierarchically structured group lent themselves to the primary

task of management which is the control of the labor process and the avoidance of unionization. This control includes not only the general rationalization of the production process but also the control of the socialization process of the workers into the plant culture by means of human relations innovations. Indeed, the QC served as the formal structure which allowed management to exert influence on the formation of informal groups at the plant and the influence that these groups exerted on worker behavior and attitudes.

What is presented in this paper is an exploratory case study. The study can not conclude that this is the typical use of the QC/QWL techniques in all environments but it does indicate what is possible. The possibility of this type of antiunion use of an allegedly humanizing work innovation bestows on labor educators the responsibility to deeply analyze the results of worker participation programs in unionized as well as non-unionized environments. This analysis may well boil down to the answer to the questions: Is the union movement stronger because of the development of the new wave of employee involvement programs? At a specific work site, is the union stronger now than before it became involved in the QWL program? In training the present and future unionists of America on the true "employee involvement" program that is unionism, labor educators have the responsibility to point out that management too has its employee involvement tradition and it has nothing to do with unionism or worker power. Indeed, the managerial tradition of employee involvement arose at the beginnings of this century as a response to the activities of unions. This tradition is based on human relations and the manipulation of the attitudes and behaviors of workers without confronting the issue of power sharing.³⁴

More research and analysis is needed to elaborate the issues raised in this paper. Participation programs often look good on paper but do they really allow for worker participation, or is the issue worker manipulation? Do they democratize work relations or can they be used to inhibit democratic processes, such as union elections? Clearly, uncritical acceptance of quality circles, and other "participative management" techniques is unwarranted. To what degree these work innovations constitute the foundations of a "new partnership" between labor and management can only be answered by exploring how the innovations can be used as weapons against workers in specific work environments. We know too much about class conflict in this society to assume that class cooperation is made possible by new managerial techniques.

34. Guillermo J. Grenier, *Inhuman Relations: Quality Circles and Anti-Unionism in American Industry* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).