Meatballs

"You get no bread with one meatball." # 11

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Meatballs is put out in the belief that a strong union at SHAP depends on an informed and involved membership. Meatballs welcomes different points of view. Contact Mike Parker, electrician second shift, body shop, or you can email meatballs@rts-tech.com. Publication labor is volunteer and views are those of the writers. For back issues go to *www.rts-tech.com/meatballs*

Increase Technology, Cut the Trades?

The corporation is planning on roughly doubling the number of robots in the plant for the new model. These robots will displace a significant number of production workers. That is something that has to be dealt with. If management wants to improve quality, it could shift people to inspection and other quality processes. But this is not management's mentality. They are looking for cost savings, not quality.

In theory the use of more automation is supposed to create more skilled jobs. But the corporate target is to reduce the skilled trades to 250 even while adding all this technology. How do they expect to run the plant with so few trades while massively increasing the technology?

If management provided us with the parts we need when we need them, the time to do a good job, and made a good job and quality process a priority, then we could get a lot more done and this plant could run a whole lot better.

But this is not the management we know--the one that thinks it is saving money by making it hard to get batteries for equipment and that makes us chase around for parts we need to keep machines running. Despite all their claims about teamwork, the reality of management's policies is to discourage participation by the trades. A policy that uses any opportunity to lay off trades, and keeps holding the lay-off hammer over our heads, is not designed to get cooperation from intelligent people. Is it really any wonder that trades are not motivated to make suggestions to improve processes, or to find ways to do specific jobs with fewer people, when this will only succeed in making it easier to lay people off?

But despite this, management still has a strategy to whack numbers out of the trades. The main strategy is to de-skill the trades by converting us to machine tenders who follow programmed, carefully timed steps for PM and diagnostics. That means:

1. Tighter direction and control of trades work through TMS and work lists rather than letting chairs take care of problems they see in their areas. Recently a supervisor tried to write up a skilled electrician for using the PanelView manual functions rather than going into the cell and "valving" the fixture.

2. Shifting work to the new team leaders. You can bet that they will feel management pressure to reset faults, adjust machines, etc. to keep things moving when we are spread thin.

3. Relying more on vendors and non-bargaining unit people to do the skilled work. Wonder why supervisors are taking PLC courses? All it takes is one hot-shot supervisor on a shift to take over important parts of our jobs. But the real threat is vendors. The company wants to rely on vendors to locate close to the plant and be ready to send in support on short notice.

It's not that this reliance on vendors produces better results. On Monday, April 25, the Body Shop lost several hours as a result of this policy. The previous week there was a problem with the Lowerator on Pallet Line 4. Instead of turning the problem over to the skilled trades, management was quick to call in an A-B serviceman, who spent the day finding nothing. The issue was dropped until it bit the plant hard on Monday. Management's readiness to call in vendors represents both its lack of respect for the trades and a strategy to do without the trades.

4. Taking shortcuts in quality, safety, and PM to produce good short-term results. We are seeing this now in the use of so-called "visual inspections" while the line is running (they'd more aptly be named "virtual inspections"), as a substitute for actually checking our equipment with meters, gauges and hands-on inspection.

A corporate policy

This is the company strategy. What do we do?

Let's be clear that we are fighting corporate policy. We cannot be fully successful unless other plants join us and we get the full power of the International Union behind us. In the meantime we have to do what we can to assert our rights and our sense of how a truly skilled workforce could make a real contribution to the company when accorded respect, time, materials, and tools. In other words we have to start the job here, in this plant and this local, and play a leadership role in the International Union. Here are some first steps.

1. Make it clear that we fully back the union policy that work done by the bargaining unit in the plant must stay part of the bargaining unit.

In the case of the trades at this time, this means fighting the company on eliminating Facilities, ITM, and the Body Shop crib. Each of these in its own way represents skilled trades work that the company wants to shift to vendors. Management wants to reduce Facilities and use outside firms for all construction and any jobs that take more than a few hours. The ITM electricians represent a small step for the trades into the area of computer networking, which will soon be central to all machine control. Cutting the Body Shop Crib is intended to reduce the involvement of trades in programming, major repairs, training, technical support, and module repair, and shift these to vendors.

We have to show that whatever cuts management makes, we will not allow vendors to do our work. This may involve actions by union reps, but in most cases it starts with us. It means whenever we see a vendor in the plant or a supervisor doing our work, we politely explain the situation and make sure that we do the work. They can be in the plant to advise, but they are not to be touching keyboards, using test instruments, or other tools. If you don't get cooperation on this, call a Steward over. But we have to be the ones to take the initiative.

2. Do the work and do it right.
Most trades have noticed that management cares about production numbers. Management slyly winks when you sign off on safety inspections you did not do completely, in order to get the line running on time. It seems win-win—management gets its production numbers and you do less work. But only management really gains when we participate in this game. By signing off on work you did not do, you establish that the work "can be done in the time allotted," and they have you set up to take the fall if something fails. Recently management fired a production worker for "falsifying company documents" for signing off on work they claimed he did not do.

The only jobs we can successfully defend are real and useful work. We have to insist on doing our jobs and doing them completely and professionally. No signing off on inspections we do not do. If the equipment does not pass inspection, call a supervisor over and/or take some other action to be sure the problem gets attention. Under current procedures, several of us will not sign off on safety weld inspections that do not pass.

3. Take the launch teams very seriously.
This may be our last chance to define the role of skilled trades in this plant. The company wants skilled participation in these teams in order to extract valuable knowledge and to get "buy-off" from the trades. Trades people who participate on these teams had better see themselves as representing all of us in our concerns about this new equipment—how it's designed to reduce both skilled work and production work.

4. Contact trades in other plants and support the production worker issues, so that this can be a united fight against corporate policy.

—MP

I Object

Dear Tedi,

Many of us in the trades have tried to improve the functioning of the plant by making serious proposals that would improve quality and equipment reliability. We have made proposals for training to prepare for the launch and to improve our ability to maintain the existing equipment. These proposals fall on deaf ears. Some of us have simply given up, resigned to watch management run this place into the ground and blow the launch. My response is to protest and fight back.

I object that the corporation is trying to save money by cutting corners on quality, safety, and doing a good job, and eliminating our jobs in the process.

I object that the management style tolerated and promoted at this plant is a combination of ignorance, telling upper management what they want to hear, "keep writing them up till they do what you say," and the public humiliation of subordinates.

I object that management has no respect for the skilled trades.

I object that the corporation thinks so little of "morale" that they pretend to measure it by absenteeism and address it with harsher punishments.

—Mike Parker

Poor Quality Will Not Save the Plant

4/23/05

To: Tedi Casasanta, Sheldon Basnett, Sam Riccardi, William Chambers

cc: Bill Parker, Kris Nyquist, Jack Copeland

The weld gun on 27 Aperture Robot 411 was changed between shifts yesterday. The new gun required some adjustments in the position programming. Although we do not believe that the weld schedules had been altered and the settings and force corresponded to the weld schedule sheets, the actual welds with the new gun had very excessive expulsion, some welds appeared to burn through, and it was impossible for the operators to work (note 1). To correct this we substantially lowered the weld schedule current on the welds. A weld checker was called over to do a chisel test on the welds and then production resumed.

I wish to protest this procedure. DaimlerChrysler standards (see note 2) and common sense require a real weld test when serious changes are made to a weld process. A chisel check does nothing more than confirm that welds are not stick welds.

This kind of short-cut attitude toward quality welds, safety welds, sealer applications, and PMs is one reason we have a reputation for poor quality products and poor morale in the plant.

—Mike Parker

Notes

1. It was not possible to use the mirror image robot 410 for comparison since it has had the wrong transformer for months and the continuous weld fault was converted to an "alert" so that the cell could remain in operation. Nor did we have the equipment available to check the calibration of the robot current readings.

2. [Quotations from DaimlerChrysler Process Standards included in in-plant hard copy version]