

Worker Kills Boss

From Detroit to Springfield and Back

Peter Rachleff

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The western Massachusetts area was rocked on Monday, October 10, with the news that a 31 year-old drill press operator at the Springfield American Bosch airplane and truck parts plant had returned from lunch with a .22 caliber rifle and killed a general foreman and critically wounded his immediate foreman.

Equally disturbing was the report in the following morning's newspaper that other workers in the factory had kept on working while Cole chased one of the foremen, Jack Goncalves, from department to department, finally shooting him twice and breaking the rifle stock over his head. Afterwards, "while Goncalves was on the floor of the heat-treating department of the sprawling plant bleeding from his wounds, other workers continued to man the production lines...While Goncalves was still on the floor of the factory, the steady drone of the machinery continued around him." (*Springfield Union*, 10/11/77) Why did William Cole take such drastic action, and why didn't anyone try to stop him?

A week before this incident, the October issue of *New Unity*, a Springfield "labor" newspaper, hit the streets. It included an article entitled "Workers Knock Bosch Management." In it, a story only too common, both in this area and around the world, began to unfold. "Certain individuals have been deliberately mistreated by both union and management," said one worker. Another offered a more detailed description of the problem: "Quite often an honest employee, union member or representative who tries to uphold the contract is constantly intimidated by their dominating supervisor or foreman, some who are new or inexperienced and believe that their position automatically makes them a supreme being."

William Cole rather directly demonstrated for all concerned that, far from being "supreme beings," foreman Goncalves and general foreman Coppola were both mortal, too mortal. Both had apparently agreed that Cole was one of those "trouble makers" for whom, according to another worker, they would "make working conditions and life as miserable as possible." Having found, along with his fellow workers, that filing grievances got you more aggravation and no relief, Cole brought the implicit "battleground" character of the plant into the open.

Production Under Piece-Work

At Bosch, most of the workers are on piece-rates. In some departments, the machines are old and break down often—especially the departments, like Cole's, which are predominantly black. Workers are supposed to get down-time-85% of their piece-rates—when they repair their broken machines. Of course, what is written in the union contract may not quite correspond to reality. One worker told an interviewer from *New Unity*: Sometimes you have to argue with a foreman for 15 minutes to get 10 minutes of down-time. You get the 10 minutes, but lose 15 minutes of piece-rate. Anyway, when a machine breaks down, all the company wants is you to get it going again. You never really get to fix it, just keep it going a little longer. So after a while it breaks down again. Your piece-rate drops and your down-time rate drops. And if you make what they call 'too much,' they up your production standard.

These and other problems are peculiar to factories where the payment system is piece-work, rather than hourly. Workers in such plants have long complained of problems created by poor materials, old machinery, and management disorganization of production. In this sense, they often face an immediate set of problems somewhat different from hourly-paid auto assembly line workers, who are well-known to celebrate when the line grinds to a halt during work hours. William Cole, for example, had run two presses simultaneously during his nine years (only six actually working, due to lay-offs) at Bosch, much as many other machine operators did. They had come to rely on the production from two machines in order to earn a living on the piece-rate system. But this fall, Goncalves, a new foreman, gave Cole only one press to operate, cutting his weekly pay by \$50.

In such factories, the foreman's power is considerable, for he has the authority to make work assignments, putting his "favorites" on jobs where it is easy to make the rate, and those he doesn't like on other jobs where it is impossible to do so. Cole had apparently been singled out for such treatment by his foreman, with the approval of Coppola, the general foreman. Another worker from the department told an interviewer:

"If Cole ever asked Goncalves for help, Jack would just yell at Cole that he wasn't making the rate. Cole would always have to argue for downtime, and Goncalves would either not give it to him or give him broken tools to fix the machines with. One day Goncalves inspected Cole on a job that nobody had been inspected on before. Coppola and Goncalves told Cole that he would have to do 100% quality or 'out the door.' 100% would be impossible—you would make \$2 an hour. Within a few days prior to October 10, Goncalves and the set-up man didn't tell Cole that an operation had been changed. They told him to do the same operation he had done before. When some of the work came out bad, Cole was reprimanded. All of us felt the extreme pressure Goncalves put us under. Jack once even told Cole, 'If you fuck up, you're going to be fired.'"

While such problems may be peculiar to factories operated on a piece-work basis, other problems at the Bosch plant are much more general. The most obvious, of course, are the boredom of running a drill press, a turret lathe, or whatever, which offers little more pleasure than putting screws in an automobile chassis. Nor are inadequate wages and tyrannical foremen unique to such factories. Nor are unions any different. Surely, one is tempted to ask, where was the steward while William Cole was being hung out to dry by his supervisors? Why didn't the newspaper reporter find any outstanding grievances filed by Cole? One worker summed up the situation:

"The union's basic attitude is 'let's go along with the company.' Even before Goncalves was foreman they allowed discrimination against blacks as to getting overtime go unchallenged. The contract should give equal protection, but it doesn't. It lets foremen threaten people's jobs...why should you file a grievance if it doesn't do any good? The union discourages you, doesn't back you up, and your boss threatens you. Why bother with the grievance procedure?"

Indeed! So on the morning of October 10, back at the press after a week-end off, William Cole, his machine again broken down and again arguing over downtime with foreman Goncalves, turned to a fellow worker and said: "If this is a battleground, this is where I'm going to make my stand." He walked home, got his .22, and was back in fifteen minutes. He found general foreman Coppola and shot him point-blank in the chest. He reloaded and went in search of Goncalves. He found him, shot him in the arm, then chased him throughout the plant, finally catching him in the heat treating department, where he broke the stock of his rifle over his head and then shot him in the chest. All this while other workers kept their machines running.

Cole surrendered to police and "gave the clenched fist power sign in front of a television crew filming his walk." (*Springfield Union* newspaper, 10/11/77) The following day at his arraignment, he refused to enter a plea. Innocent pleas were entered for him, and he was sent to Bridgewater State Hospital (therapists take notice!) for twenty days of "observation."

Meanwhile, his action has been the subject of numerous conversations around the area. Some are trying to organize a defense for Cole and were at first considering calling in attorney (now Detroit Councilman) Kenneth V. Cockrel, but the person who was to contact him, having had experience with Cockrel in the old League of Revolutionary Black Workers, refused to do so on the grounds that Cockrel was an opportunist. Cockrel had successfully defended Detroit auto worker James Johnson in 1974 after the latter had shot and killed two foremen and a skilled tradesman.

Also, the tenor of foreman/worker relations in factories all over the area have been effected. A foreman at a cutlery factory was put on the spot by several old high school friends at a local bar one Friday night. The hassling he

usually gets goes along the lines of “Haven’t you quit yet?” or “Do you own the place yet?,” but this particular night the ribbing revolved around the events in Springfield—“getting worried somebody’ll shoot you?” and “You treating the workers better this week?”

As for William Cole, maybe someday he and James Johnson will be remembered like the volunteers of Bunker Hill, who fired the “shot heard ‘round the world.”



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